United Nations A/S-23/PV.6

General Assembly

Twenty-third special session

Official Records

6th meeting
Wednesday, 7 June 2000, 3 p.m.
New York

President: Mr. Gurirab ..... (Namibia)

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations (A/S-23/6/Add.1)

The President: I should like to inform members that since the issuance this morning of document A/S-23/6/Add.1, Ukraine has made the necessary payment to reduce its arrears below the amount specified in Article 19 of the Charter. May I take it that the General Assembly takes note of this information?

It was so decided.

This information will be reflected in the addendum to document A/S-23/6 to be issued.

In the absence of the President, Mr. Rodríguez Parrilla (Cuba), Vice-President, took the Chair.

Agenda items 8 and 9 (*continued*)

Review and appraisal of progress made in the implementation of the twelve critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action

Further actions and initiatives for overcoming obstacles to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Om Pradhan, Chairman of the delegation of Bhutan.

Mr. Pradhan (Bhutan): Allow me to congratulate the President on his assumption of the presidency of the General Assembly at this special session. We are confident that with his vast experience, able leadership and innate wisdom, he will guide our deliberations to a successful conclusion.

We are gathered here to review and assess the progress in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and to propose further initiatives for gender equality, development and peace in the twenty-first century. In this connection, my delegation commends the laudable work done by the Commission on the Status of Women, which also undertook the arduous task of acting as the Preparatory Committee for this special session.

Although we have seen progress on all 12 critical areas of concern since Beijing, there is still much more that needs to be done to fulfil our pledges to achieve gender equality. Among our topmost priorities is the need to take concerted action to eliminate violence against women in all its forms, be it domestic violence, rape, trafficking in women and children, violence in armed conflict, female infanticide, female genital mutilation or other cruel practices. The trafficking and exploitation of women and children generally move from areas of poverty to areas of prosperity, be it in the national or the international context. This is something that our whole being rebels against and on which there is agreement within the international community to take action to end such practices. However, adequate political will and resources for urgent initiatives are

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seriously lacking. My delegation calls for immediate and effective measures to be taken by Governments, the international community, the United Nations and civil society to put an end to such practices.

In our region of South Asia, the member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have taken a number of initiatives to meet the daunting challenges of gender inequality, and especially to combat violence against women and the serious threats faced by the girl child. The girl child has, in fact, been at the centre of SAARC's initiatives. SAARC declared the year 1990 as the Year of the Girl Child and the decade 1991 to 2000 as the Decade of the Girl Child. Also notable is the consensus to adopt a convention to combat the crime of trafficking in women and children, which has been finalized for adoption at the next SAARC summit.

In Bhutan, by tradition and culture, women have always been equal partners in our society. By law, there is equality between the sexes, especially in matters relating to family, inheritance, marriage and divorce. There is no discrimination on the basis of gender. Despite this situation, during the past decade, the Royal Government and the National Assembly of Bhutan have made conscious efforts to ensure that there are no provisions that could or may adversely affect the female gender in our laws, rules and regulations. Any element that could be construed as being discriminatory or that affected women adversely, if found, was revised to ensure equality as well as to take care of the special needs of women. For example, the Marriage Act of 1980 was amended by the National Assembly in 1996 so as to ensure that women and children received absolutely just treatment when it came to any situation relating to marriage and divorce. Legal provisions have also been formulated to deal with any form of discrimination against women in various employment situations.

As far as health, education and economic opportunities are concerned, male and female are on an equal footing. In fact, about 50 per cent of school-going children are now female, which is in keeping with the male/female population ratio. To further meet basic educational needs, the Government has established adult and non-formal education centres throughout the country. Up to 80 per cent of the beneficiaries in these centres happen to be women. Likewise, in the health sector, with the Royal Government's commitment to attaining the goal of health for all, very significant reductions have been registered in infant and maternal mortality rates within the past decade. Another positive development has been the increasing participation of women in professions that hitherto were considered male domains. As a consequence, today we have women in our defence and law and order services. There are also women in the judiciary and legislature and at practically all decision-making levels.

In conclusion, even though we have made substantial progress towards achieving gender equality, our efforts to further enhance the involvement of women in all walks of national life continue. Bhutan is firmly committed to the pledges we made at Beijing.

The Acting President *(spoke in Spanish)*: I now give the floor to Mrs. Jewel Howard Taylor, Chairperson of the delegation of Liberia.

Mrs. Taylor (Liberia): It is an honour for me to be a part of such a historic session on gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century. It is equally relevant, especially for us women, because this special session's agenda seeks consciously to acknowledge the need for enhancing all of our roles in society.

I bring sincere greetings from the women of the Republic of Liberia. Our message is clear. We will not rest until all opportunities are available equally to all. I would also like to extend our gratitude, on behalf of our Government, to all of the international agencies that have not given up on Liberia and continue to help us make a difference in the lives of our people. To those still on the fence of indecision, I can state emphatically that it is better to bring the pieces together, however fragmented, than to either pull it apart or simply stay away. For, as members of one global village, the successes and failures are all of ours. Our Government remains committed to the principles of the Beijing Platform for Action.

This gathering is a milestone in the lives of women and society as a whole because it provides the world with another opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to saving humanity from the vicious circle of underdevelopment. I am equally delighted to note that this review process is beneficiary-driven and not donor-driven, because countries and regions have been afforded the opportunity to steer the process in concert with their development partners as a means of achieving sustainability of efforts towards gender

equality, development and peace. I am therefore pleased that this special session has focused on eliminating the persistent negative socio-cultural, political and economic tendencies that affect gender equality, development, peace and the advancement of women.

This is with the aim of consolidating the consensus built at all levels of the review process, thereby facilitating the charting of concrete and responsive policy and programme measures for the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. It further calls for a stronger voice for women in shaping their societies, as evidenced in the following ways: investment in the education of girls to facilitate a higher rate of return; acknowledgement and enhancement of the roles of women, recognizing that they are among those most affected by the problems of poverty; integration of women into political decision-making as economic actors; inclusion of women in the management of natural resources; and enforcement of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Representatives all have spoken as one voice, as the core issues affecting us are the same. I would like to add my voice and the voices of our women to those that have already been heard. In addition, let me highlight some critical issues which, if inadequately addressed, will continue to have a negative impact on the progress made so far.

I wish to request the indulgence of the women of the States Members of the United Nations to speak now on their behalf.

For us, the issue of gender equality is one of humanity. Those of us coming out of war and striving to rebuild our lost heritage and our lives face issues that continue to impinge on our efforts to implement the Beijing Platform for Action.

These issues include, but are not limited to, the following: first, continued civil conflict and strife around Africa; second, indebtedness and high repayment rates, which take up a considerable portion of all of the funds that are available to us, which could be utilized to provide other long-term social and economic benefits for our people in the critical areas of health, education, income-generating activities for women, among others; third, inadequate grant-aid packages that do not take into full consideration our special circumstances as separate and distinct nations; fourth, regional and international trade barriers that do not provide the necessary advantages required for separate nations to derive profits which could benefit their economies; fifth, inadequate capacity-building at all levels to ensure sustainable, people-centred human development; sixth, unequal opportunities to affect critical human development and state-of-well-being indicators, which, due to the prevailing levels of poverty of our nations, cannot be totally achieved; and seventh, unattainability of the critical requirements for achieving health and basic education for all in the year 2000, measures which seem too abstract for nations whose poverty levels are further exacerbated by civil strife or the impacts of conflicts.

Five years have elapsed since Beijing, and we are still grappling with the concept of gender equality. We are still unable to quantify in real terms the impact of gender equality on our individual and collective lives.

Governments are still giving women token positions in areas where their presence hardly makes a difference and does not significantly impact on collective decision-making. Our positioning in government institutions must be credibly upgraded to positions of national trust, where we are ideally afforded the opportunity to bring about real change. This, in my view, would result in true gender equality.

I would like to call on all Governments, international organizations and donor institutions to give women a real chance to make a meaningful difference. To our male counterparts, I would say, do not be afraid of the consensus reached for the acknowledgement and enhancement of our roles. For women still traditionally hold the family unit together, and society acknowledges that we are the sustainers of the human race.

These realizations and affirmations must not negate the partnership which naturally should exist among men and women. Neither should women's empowerment compromise the status of our male counterparts. The evolving context instead should be mutually reinforcing.

Let me challenge our male counterparts to reaffirm their commitment, as dominant policy formulators and implementers, to afford us, during this twenty-first century, the opportunities that would enable us to make a positive difference wherever we are placed. Provide us with the relevant and appropriate tools that will meaningfully transform, as

well as enhance, our capacities to contribute to peace-building, security, development and nation-building. Give us equality of resources and responsibility for decision-making. And distribute on an equitable basis resources to all nations, thereby enabling each nation to achieve true gender equality for all.

Accordingly, the women of the Mano River Union Basin countries reaffirm their commitment to the Declaration of Political Principles on freedom and the rights of peoples and democratization, adopted in Abuja, Nigeria, on 6 July 1999, within the framework of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

We call on the United Nations to support the women's pledge to mobilize all resources to ensure the rapid restoration of peace in the Union countries, ensuring that we leave a legacy of building bridges instead of erecting walls.

In closing, I wish to appeal to all of the Members of the United Nations system to enable all stakeholders, especially of the African continent, to adopt dialogue and interaction as the mode of communication in this era.

We must realize that all we have expressed in our deliberations during this special session will amount to nothing in the absence of genuine peace, security and mutual cooperation among and between all nations of the world.

The United Nations must continue in its efforts at peace-building and peace consolidation around the world while urging its partners to put into place systems that would ensure this momentum, in order to create a decent, stable and fair world order. In this way we can truly say that we have given our best to safeguarding the heritage of our children and of future generations.

Finally, may our participation here this week give all of us a renewed sense of appreciation for humanity to enable each of us to distinguish right from wrong; to stand up for genuine support and understanding; and to make a full, unwavering commitment to peace and justice around the world.

May God grant us his peace.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Željka Antunović, Deputy Prime Minister of Croatia.

Mrs. Antunović (Croatia): It is a pleasure and a privilege to address the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century". Five years after the Fourth World Conference on Women is an appropriate time to reflect on the current status of women and on further actions for achieving gender equality, to assess the progress achieved at all levels, and to reaffirm our commitments for the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

During the lengthy preparatory process leading up to the special session, we saw that much has been accomplished worldwide, yet much remains to be achieved.

On this occasion I would like to mention some of the progress that Croatia has made in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The most substantial achievement has been the significant increase in the participation of women in Croatia's political arena.

At Beijing, my country reported that women comprised 5.4 per cent of the membership of the lower house of the Croatian Parliament. Since the recent election, earlier this year, the percentage of members of Parliament who are women is now 21 per cent, while women make up 13 per cent of the new Government. Taking into account past trends, we can view this as a significant step towards our ultimate goal of full political participation for women.

Gender equality plays an important part in all aspects of the democratization process currently underway. Indeed, endeavours made by almost all the political parties to include a significant component of women as their electoral candidates have proved to be the best recourse to bring about change. Equally important as an essential strategy in the quest for adequate participation by women in political life is the role played by non-governmental organizations and the media in raising public awareness.

I have the honour to announce that, in order to further enhance the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women nationally, Croatia signed the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the opening day of this special session and will take the necessary steps towards its speedy ratification.

In the Republic of Croatia women represent 46.2 per cent of the total employed work force, and 52. 4 per cent of the work force employed in informal sectors of the economy. Eliminating discrimination against women is this area has become one of Croatia's primary concerns. To this end, the Government is supporting several national programmes that, among other things, assist enterprises with labour surpluses to avoid targeting women and older persons.

The globalization of the economy ultimately requires an enlargement of markets through subregional cooperation. I am pleased to report to the special session that within the Central European Initiative, which encompasses 16 Central European countries, the Republic of Croatia organized and hosted — in cooperation with the Economic Commission for Europe and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development — an international conference on women entrepreneurship and East-West cooperation. There was intensive follow-up by the participating countries. Concerted efforts are also being made to introduce women-related issues into the projects currently administered under the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe.

The Republic of Croatia is fully committed to the observance of women's human rights as developed and adopted within the United Nations. In our pragmatic approach we are giving particular attention to measures to prevent all forms of violence against women. The Government and non-governmental organizations have cooperated to prevent violence against women. My Government has taken steps to adopt legislation that provides due protection to victims of domestic violence. In our deliberations we need to focus more on the concepts of prevention and education, strengthening cooperation between governmental and non-governmental institutions and efficacious networking of victim-support services. More attention should also be given to working with offenders, as well as to raising public awareness and establishing a comprehensive system of cooperation at all levels.

Ensuring and protecting the equal human rights of women and men, as well as mainstreaming the gender perspective in all governmental policies, is seen as the only way forward for my Government. From our experience, we think that education aimed at eliminating stereotypes regarding gender roles, strong participation of women in the economy, with equal pay for equal work, and reconciling work and family life, as well as partnership in parenthood, all lead to a welcome increase of participation by women in decision-making processes and, in turn, help to advance the status of women in society as a whole.

Croatia has established its own national machinery, the Commission on Gender Equality Issues. The Commission includes a broad cross-section of representatives from all Government ministries, as well as from non-governmental and academic organizations. Although the Commission still lacks the appropriate resources, by joining forces with all segments of civil society we hope to achieve some tangible results in implementing its central objectives. Following this special session, the Commission, in cooperation with non-governmental organizations, will develop further the national plan of action in order to ensure the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the special session.

Croatia fully supports the role of the Commission on the Status of Women and, as a member, will work towards improving its working methods to monitor the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. In trying to identify an appropriate mechanism under which a comprehensive review process could be carried out, the regular session of the Commission on the Status of Women could also serve as a high-level ministerial meeting forum. In this way it could significantly facilitate our work on gender equality issues by providing us with the requisite opportunity to exchange lessons learned at the national level, and thereby allow for the replication of best practices.

In closing, I will say that it should not be overlooked that the women's movement successfully launched manifold activities that ultimately guaranteed the emancipation of women during the twentieth century. Our task in the twenty-first century is to take the fight for women's empowerment further by creating an environment in which women's equality will be guaranteed to all as an inherent human right in every society.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Mary Kaphwereza Banda, Minister of Gender, Youth and Community Services of Malawi.

Mrs. Banda (Malawi): On behalf of the Malawi delegation, and indeed on my own behalf, I wish to join those who have spoken before me in congratulating the President and his entire Bureau on

being elected to chair the General Assembly at this special session. Furthermore, I wish to congratulate the Secretary-General and his officials for an encouraging statement.

Before I deliver my statement, please allow me to extend sincere apologies from the State President of the Republic of Malawi, Mr. Bakili Muluzi, who was invited to attend this special session but is unable to do so. Instead, he has appointed me to represent him on this auspicious occasion. My statement will be devoted to a brief discussion of what Malawi has done, and is doing, by way of implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and will also highlight the major challenges and obstacles encountered in the implementation process.

As a follow-up to the global Platform for Action adopted at the 1995 Beijing Conference, Malawi conducted awareness-raising meetings on the outcomes of the Conference. The Government of Malawi also came up with its own platform for action in 1997, and a national gender policy, in March 2000, through a consultative process with non-governmental organizations, the private sector, civil society and donors. The Malawi platform for action is a clear testimony of the Government's commitment to achieve equality and equity between women and men in the twenty-first century. To demonstrate the Government's political will, the Malawi platform for action was launched by the State President, Mr. Muluzi. The platform for action is therefore a powerful instrument for the empowerment of women, as it calls for the integration of gender perspectives in all national development policies and programmes.

The Malawi platform for action identifies four priority areas of concern for Malawi out of the 12 thematic areas of the Beijing Platform for Action. Those four priority areas are: first, poverty alleviation and empowerment, which encompasses women's participation in agriculture, access to economic resources, employment, women's reproductive health, food security and nutrition, the environment and natural resource management; secondly, the girl child, which covers harmful traditional and cultural practices that negatively affect the girl child's right to proper growth, protection and development; thirdly, violence against women, which covers gender-based discrimination and the marginalization of women and girls in the private, public and domestic arenas; and fourthly, peace, which covers women's rights, international conventions, protocols and treaties that promote peace, the plight of Malawian women, children and persons with disabilities in relation to their shelter conditions, and women's participation in politics and decision-making.

With regard to poverty alleviation and empowerment, the Government of Malawi has created a policy environment conducive to the formation and operation of gender-specific non-governmental organizations dealing with women and gender issues. Financial lending institutions for micro- and medium-sized enterprises have been encouraged to target mostly women in rural areas, thus enabling the informal sector to be recognized as a major source of employment for women.

Reproductive health services have been liberalized to ensure easy access for both women and men of reproductive age. The Government has also instituted adolescent reproductive health programmes which provide adolescents with information, counselling and contraceptive services. This has contributed to a contraceptive prevalence rate that increased from 7 per cent in 1992 to 14 per cent in 1996. In keeping with the commitments relating to women's reproductive health in the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, the Malawi population policy has been reviewed to mainstream gender.

As a follow-up to the International Conference on Nutrition, Malawi has formulated a national plan for nutrition, whose emphasis is on dietary diversification and food security and utilization. Unfortunately, despite this progress, the Malawian population still faces rampant and chronic malnutrition. For example, stunting is at 48 per cent, wasting is at 7 per cent and underweight is at 30 per cent. That unacceptable nutritional status poses a big challenge for the country's development efforts.

On the girl child, through its girls attainment in basic literacy and education programme, the Malawi Government has intensified social mobilization campaigns to change negative cultural and societal attitudes towards girls' education. The Government introduced free primary education in the 1994-1995 academic year, which led to the doubling of girls' enrolment rates in primary school. The provision of scholarships to successful primary and secondary school students increased girls' enrolment from 53 per

cent in 1992 to 95 per cent in 1999. Furthermore, the rate of retention for girls in school increased from 12 per cent to 27 per cent during the same period. The Malawi Government has also increased its budget allocation to the education sub-sector from 46 per cent of the social sector budget in 1992 to 69 per cent in the 1999-2000 fiscal year.

In addition, our policy on pregnancy has been reviewed to enable girls and boys to be readmitted to the school system after child delivery. The girl child who fails to go back to school is also given an opportunity to enrol in the adult literacy and education programme.

With regard to violence against women, a number of organizations and institutions such as the Law Commission, the Office of the Ombudsman and the Human Rights Commission have been established to offer victim support mechanisms and counselling services. In addition the Government has instituted various measures for dealing with perpetrators of abuse. However, since most cases of violence go unreported, a nationwide campaign on violence against women was conducted in 1998 to create awareness. The campaign reached over 30,000 community members, who have since formed action committees to combat violence against women at the community level.

At the national level, the Government has reviewed some discriminatory laws, such as the marriage act, the affiliation act and the wills and inheritance act, especially its property-grabbing component. At the regional level, in 1999 Malawi signed an addendum, on the eradication of violence against women and children, to the Southern African Development Community declaration on gender and development.

On peace, the Government has ensured that cross-border peacemaking missions, trade negotiation missions and trade fairs include both women and men. Peace is not merely the absence of war. It is a fundamental human right which enables women and men, girls and boys to participate effectively in decision-making. The Government has thus taken steps to increase the number of women participating in politics and holding decision-making positions, particularly in the legislature, civil service and judiciary. Today, Malawi boasts a women as Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Malawi is pleased to report that, apart from our having sensitized our armed forces on gender this year, for the first time in the history of Malawian nation, female soldiers, 59 of them, have been admitted to the ranks of the hitherto male-dominated armed forces.

Notwithstanding those achievements, a number of challenges have hindered the process of implementing the Beijing Platform for Action. Those challenges include: the negative effects of globalization, due to a lack of technological capacity in Malawi, which undermines the country's competitiveness on the global market; overemphasis of the economic gains of structural adjustment programmes, which have been at the expense of social gains desired by the Malawian population, especially women and children; inadequate financial resources that hinder the implementation of well-intentioned programmes; the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which continues to impact negatively on the Malawian population, particularly on women, who are also expected to take care of the rising number of orphans.

In conclusion, the Government of Malawi has placed gender issues high on its development agenda because it recognizes that sustainable development with a human face cannot be achieved unless women, men, girls and boys work together as partners in development into the new millennium.

The President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Virgilia Matabele, Minister for Women's Affairs and Coordination of Social Action of Mozambique.

Mrs. Matabele (Mozambique) (*spoke in Portuguese; English text furnished by the delegation*): Allow me, on behalf of the Government of Mozambique and on my own account, to congratulate you, Sir, on your assumption of the presidency of the General Assembly at this special session, which is being held at the very beginning of the new millennium. This event is vested with particular importance, given the relevance of the issues to be addressed under the title "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century". This subject affords us an opportunity for deep reflection and for a collective assessment of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, aimed at putting in place more effective measures for the fulfilment of our national plans in the years to come.

Allow me to refer to the difficult times that my country went through in the first quarter of this year. Torrential rains associated with cyclones caused unprecedented floods in my country, and this natural disaster left a trail of destruction, death and misery for thousands of Mozambicans, particularly women, children and the elderly.

The floods also washed away the belongings of the people affected, in addition to causing extensive destruction to agriculture, livestock and infrastructures such as roads, railways, power lines and water supply systems, and to bridges, schools, hospitals, health-care centres, Government buildings and other public and private property.

This tragedy was a serious setback to various projects. I would like to take this opportunity to express, on behalf of the people and the Government of Mozambique, our immense gratitude to the States Members of the United Nations and the international community at large for their generous support and solidarity.

The advancement of women is becoming more complex in the current context of globalization. The 1.3 billion women, children and elderly people living in absolute poverty are striking evidence of this challenge. Millions of women and children in developing countries who still lack basic education, health care and nutrition further exemplify the magnitude of social inequity today.

To overcome these negative trends, countries must take concrete and tangible action. In this regard, the Government of Mozambique has made tremendous efforts to comply with its commitments under the Beijing Platform for Action. Our ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and our accession to other regional programmes, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Declaration on Gender and Development and the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development, in which the main aspects of our national plan are reflected give additional impetus to the promotion of women in the social, economic and political spheres.

As a member of SADC, we are also guided by the recommendations of the Summit of our heads of State, held in Blantyre, Republic of Malawi, in 1997, which established a regional plan of action that calls for the promotion of gender equity through the empowerment of women.

Within the framework of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries, of which we are also a member, we have initiated a coordination plan to enhance national programmes for the promotion of equality and women's rights.

It is also worth noting that, among the 12 areas contained in the Beijing Platform for Action, the Government of Mozambique has identified and concentrated its efforts in seven priority areas viewed as crucial for the advancement of women. The first relates to women, poverty and employment. Our efforts have been directed towards the eradication of absolute poverty, including access to land and credit for women, and the establishment of a socio-economic, political and legal framework that gives special status to women's access to employment. Actions have been undertaken to make a reality of the principle of equal opportunity, with a strong emphasis being placed on the participation of rural and disabled women.

The second area is that of women, the environment and agriculture. The Government has given priority to the involvement of women in sustainable agricultural development. In this respect, women are playing an important role in the sustainable use of natural resources, as well as the preservation and management of the environment.

The third area is education and training. The strategic plan for education in our country pays special attention to girls' education. As a result of this plan, from 1994 to 1999, access to education for women and girls increased from 63 per cent to 82 per cent.

The fourth area is women and health. In this area, the Government has been making efforts to guarantee women's access to appropriate health care by expanding health-care networks, training health professionals and traditional midwives, increasing immunization coverage and providing pre-natal and post-natal assistance.

Furthermore, the Government of Mozambique has established a national committee to coordinate the implementation of the programme to combat HIV/AIDS, based on the education of all members of society, especially girls, about reproductive health and safe sexual practices.

The fifth area is women's rights and violence. With regard to this subject, the Government has committed itself to increasing the effectiveness of all regional and international legal instruments to which it is party, by reviewing national legislation. It has also been taking action to increase awareness on women rights among the members of Mozambican society. To this end, the Government has been involved in close consultations with civil society in the process of reviewing labour law, land law, family law and the commercial code, aimed at incorporating the main provisions contained in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other related international and regional legal instruments.

The sixth area covers institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women. The Government has established the Ministry for Women and the Coordination of Social Affairs, which is coordinating the activities of an operative group comprising Government officials, civil society and academic institutions, whose objective is to supervise and enhance the implementation of policies and programmes for the advancement of women and gender equality. I would also like to refer to a forum of non-governmental organizations established in my country, which has the task of creating a gender-equal society.

The seventh area is women, leadership and decision-making. The Government has been encouraging the women's participation in leadership and decision-making in the political, social and economic spheres. From 1995 to 2000, the number of women representatives in Parliament increased from 65 to 74, among a total of 250 parliamentarians, which means that women account for the total. At the executive level, the number of women has increased from one minister and four deputy ministers to three ministers — responsible for planning and finance, women and the coordination of social actions, and higher education, science and technology — and 5 deputy ministers, responsible for foreign affairs and cooperation, health, education, employment and mineral resources and energy. The number of secretaries-general has increased from two to five, and district administrators from one to six. At the municipal level of 790 members of the municipal assemblies elected in 33 local legislative bodies, 235 are women, accounting for 29.74 per cent of the total.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm my Government's commitment to the goals set out in the Beijing Platform for Action and hope that the outcome of this special session will guide all nations in their efforts aimed at enhancing the advancement of women. We also hope that the outcome of this session will contribute to the removal of all obstacles that still stand in the way of women's empowerment.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Eliuel Pretrick, Secretary for Health, Education and Social Affairs of the Federated States of Micronesia.

Mr. Pretrick (Micronesia): It is an honour for me to represent my country at this special session of the General Assembly to review the progress made thus far in addressing the issues contained in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and to assess the role of women in the twenty-first century. It was not so long ago that I stood before this same body to affirm my country's support for the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. At the dawn of a new millennium, it is discouraging to note that in the twenty-first century the challenges have not changed, and we are still faced with critical issues such as human rights violations, women's role in security and globalization, to name a few. It is therefore appropriate that this special session focuses on gender equality and women's role in peace and development.

I am pleased to note that the Government of the Federated States of Micronesia has made considerable progress in the implementation of the 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action. The greatest challenge in our implementation effort has been the structural adjustment programme that my Government has had to undertake since our Conference held in Beijing. This adjustment programme has resulted in the upgrading of the women's machinery from a Women's Interest Desk to a Women in Development Unit, thereby empowering the Unit with wider roles and functions to address and mainstream women's concerns into national policy formulation.

On the home front, a nationwide economic summit held last year agreed that there is a need to address the under-representation of women in decision-making positions in the social and economic sectors. A number of policy strategies were adopted to address these concerns. One of these policy recommendations was to look towards the possibility of upgrading the

Women in Development Unit to a full cabinet-level position.

In the political arena, I am proud to announce that the new Administration of the national Government now has a woman cabinet member, and a woman was recently appointed a member of the National Scholarship Board. We also have a woman senator in the State legislature. These may be minor accomplishments to some, but they are an indication that the opportunities have always been there, though women are just now asserting themselves in these positions.

Since Beijing, about 20 female doctors have graduated from our medical schools under Government sponsorship. This has effectively improved the health of our women through the simple fact that more and more women frequent our hospitals and clinics because they find it much easier to consult a woman doctor.

Women in the Federated States of Micronesia make up over 50 per cent of the population. Thus, they are major contributors to the economy. The Government acknowledges their role, and to facilitate women's access to capital and credit schemes, it has agreed to put in place strategies that will enhance the career development of young women through marketing and technical assistance. The Government has also agreed to pass legislation to help ease women's multisectoral role so that they can attain economic self-sufficiency.

Public awareness activities have been undertaken to educate the general public on special health needs and the civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights of women. We believe that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is an important document, but should not be viewed as the only conduit to addressing these concerns. We believe that the initiatives to improve gender equality should be nationally driven, for that is the only way they can be effective and far-reaching. While the Convention awaits congressional ratification, local workshops and the recent translation of the document into two of the four major vernaculars have raised awareness of it.

The Federated States of Micronesia has a land mass of 271 square miles and thus is sensitive to the problems of population and land degradation. We acknowledge the important balance between our population growth and the environment we live in. As part of the Government strategy to have a multisectoral policy, Government activities in collaboration with international organizations and stakeholders are being undertaken to address these concerns. I am proud to announce that there has been a decrease in the population growth rate since Beijing, from 3.4 per cent to 1.9 per cent. This has been made possible through public awareness and the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders.

Our national college now incorporates population education, family life and sex education in the teacher's certificate course. Additionally, a peer-counselling centre has been established at the national college campus to provide a place where students can obtain information on family planning.

The traditional concept of security has changed from concerns about nuclear war to include concerns about environment, drug trafficking, refugees, migrants and HIV/AIDS. Women fall victim to these because of their vulnerability. The Government is currently reviewing legislative provisions to ensure that women have the appropriate mechanisms to deal with these issues.

Environment is a vital issue to my Government, as our very survival depends on it. While we, like any other developing country, strive for economic stability, our development efforts have to be sustainable. My Government is of the view that women, as stewards of our natural resources, have an important role to play in development, as all forms of economic development will involve the utilization of our natural resources.

My Government believes that economic and social development can be attained only if we have a healthy and literate population. With that in mind, our plan of action for the next five years will be to focus on the education and training needs of the social sector, as we believe these to be the key to improving the quality of life of our women.

Lastly, we must not forget that, while some of these issues are global in nature and need the support of regional and international institutions, their implications are national and it is therefore important that the solution be within a country's means effectively to implement.

The President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Jeanne Dambendzet, Minister for

Civil Service, Administrative Reform and Advancement of Women of the Congo.

Mrs. Dambendzet (Congo) (*spoke in French*): It is a great honour and pleasure for me to speak from this rostrum of the Congo's contribution to this evaluation of Beijing + 5. I sho like first to join those speakers who have congratulated you, Mr. President, on your election and on behalf of my Government and on my own behalf, to wish all possible success to the work of this twenty-third special session of the General Assembly.

The international community is meeting today to address an issue that is perfectly obvious. It is our task to stress the fundamental role of women in all social systems and to assess the progress made since Beijing in order to develop new strategies for the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Although women represent nearly 53 per cent of the world's population, paradoxically they continue to be pushed into the background. Women remain the main targets of the scourges that undermine our societies, including illiteracy, poverty, violence and disasters of all kinds. They are also the main victims of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This is far from an exhaustive list. Other ills, such as armed conflict, still impede the implementation of policies for the advancement of women.

At a time when the international community is assessing the progress made since Beijing, women are still underrepresented at the national institutional level and within the bodies of the United Nations system, despite the progress made by the Secretary-General in appointing women to many positions. To him, we convey here our encouragement and support on the path he has chosen.

This hostile environment must not, however, mask the many achievements that have been made at the national, regional and international levels. These achievements, in spite of numerous obstacles, have helped to improve the status of women since the irreversible process began in Mexico in 1975.

In Congo, a number of measures have been taken within the 12 critical areas defined at Beijing. The armed conflicts that have erupted in my country since 1993, although raising obvious problems, have not diminished the will of our authorities to support the cause of women. Thus, two guidelines — one on the national policy for the advancement of women and another on the action plan for the years 2000-2002 — were adopted by the Government in September 1999. These documents were developed on the basis of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action.

Greatly shaken by devastating fratricidal wars, Congo has had to assign priorities to the critical areas defined at Beijing. Thus, the campaign against violence against women and girls, the participation of women in the resolution of conflicts and the return to peace, along with the struggle against poverty, are considered to be matters of urgency, with limited help from the international community. A number of measures have been taken in these areas, as outlined in our report filed with the Secretariat of this special session.

Since Beijing, and in spite of the difficulties that my country has experienced, the process of implementing the Beijing Platform is under way and irreversible. This dynamic is the product of the will of the President of the Republic, Mr. Denis Sassou Nguesso, who actively supports the advancement of women and of the international community. It is also demonstrated in the existence of a growing civil society. More than 212 non-governmental organizations and women's associations have been established at the national level, in rural areas and within grass roots communities. A true partnership has been established between the department responsible for the advancement of women and the women's non-governmental organizations.

All of these achievements have been made in a context marked by a return to peace following the signing of the agreements of 16 November at Pointe-Noire and, on 29 December 1999 in Brazzaville, of those on the ceasefire and cessation of hostilities. These agreements marked the end of fighting throughout our national territory and the initiation of a process of reconciliation and restoration of peace in the Congo, under the leadership of a committee led by President El Hadj Omar Bongo of the Gabonese Republic. The launching of a national dialogue among all of the parties militarily involved in the conflict led to the resettling of displaced persons, the return of many exiles, the demobilization of combatants and the collection of weapons currently under way.

The Congo-Ocean Railway, which has been unusable since the eruption of hostilities in 1998, is almost 80 per cent operational between Pointe-Noire

and Brazzaville, and the complete rebuilding of the railroad is almost finished.

The electoral process has begun with an administrative census and will eventually lead to legislative and presidential elections and to the establishment of democratically elected organs. All Congolese, at home and abroad, who refuse to join this normalization process, preferring the logic of violence and war, should get a sympathetic hearing neither from the friends of the Congolese people, particularly women, nor from the international community, the defender of human rights and the social progress of nations. Freedom of the press, the expression of democracy, is guaranteed. The opposition is unafraid and speaks freely.

The African continent as a whole is feeling the adverse effects of economic globalization, the burden of debt servicing and the reduction of official development assistance. These constraints, added to the weight of traditions and prejudices, cancel out many of the efforts undertaken to advance women.

The Sixth African Regional Conference on Women, held in Addis Ababa from 22 to 26 November 1999, assessed the implementation of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action. The general consensus was that poverty, health, HIV/AIDS and malaria, education and the promotion of the rights of women are urgent issues that must be vigorously addressed. In these areas, several measures are being undertaken by Governments and non-governmental organizations.

But many obstacles limit their effectiveness. These obstacles must be eliminated, because they increase the vulnerability and the marginalization of African women, who are so important to development.

The Addis Ababa Conference concluded with the adoption of two instruments, including the Declaration of the Sixth African Regional Conference on Women and the Plan of Action for Africa to expedite the implementation of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action for the advancement of women. I reiterate here that Congo has acceded to both instruments.

These two texts reflect Africa's faith in major changes aimed at promoting equality between the sexes, development and peace at the dawn of the third millennium. Here we must emphasize the fundamental role and the importance of the Committee on Women and Development in the battle that African women are fighting for active participation in the development process. We must highlight the laudable efforts being made by the Organization of African Unity and the Economic Commission for Africa to increase awareness of, and to provide support for resolutions and recommendations on, women's issues.

At the global level, the mobilization of the international community to promote the advancement of women is one single battle, in spite of all political, economic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity.

Certainly the progress that has been made is not uniform in nature. Depending on the areas or indicators, States are more or less advanced. However, the process is irreversible, and each party at its own pace will create a genuine partnership between men and women. The legal instruments, information, technical assistance and resources that have been mobilized by the international community represent valuable sources of support.

Equality, which will ensure full participation by women in national activities, must be attained and consolidated. The advancement of women, which is imperative in the development of human resources, will make it possible for States to mobilize additional forces for national construction.

Indeed, women are important creators of wealth, particularly in the informal sector and the agricultural sector. They are also central to the process of the socialization of children. It is therefore necessary to educate them in the important role of raising a new generation of citizens who respect the values of democracy and the principle of equality between men and women. The adoption of affirmative-action measures in order to strengthen the presence of women in various decision-making areas should be encouraged.

The many international instruments that have been adopted and ratified by the States Members of the United Nations have made it possible for women to attain equality. But what is the point of de jure equality if strong, concrete measures do not accompany it? What is the point of a proclamation of equality if the oft-identified obstacles to its implementation are not overcome?

Accordingly, in my dual capacity as President of the Sixth African Regional Conference on Women and as Congolese Minister for the Advancement of Women,

let me reiterate the need fully to implement the various plans of action adopted at Beijing and Addis Ababa. The involvement of African women will provide the human resources needed to achieve greater solidarity on the international level, including debt forgiveness, the benefits of which could be devoted to the financing of women's projects.

The dynamic partnership that is developing between the State and civil society, and between Governmental mechanisms and women's organizations, is a strong sign of the times that must be promoted as part of the threefold goal of equality, development and peace. This is the current state of the struggle for the emancipation of women at the beginning of this new century.

In recent history, tireless and continuing efforts have been undertaken by both men and women of conviction. The future is therefore full of promise. However, this promise cannot be fulfilled unless we see greater political will, increased solidarity between North and South and the mobilization of adequate resources, and greater awareness of gender-specific issues and their integration in all development policies. Only if these conditions are met can the challenge of attaining gender equality, development and peace be achieved.

The President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Constance Yai, Minister of the Family and Advancement of Women of Côte d'Ivoire.

Mrs. Yai (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, Mr. President, I wish to express the satisfaction of my delegation at seeing you presiding over our work.

In recent years, the international community has taken major steps for the advancement of women. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, whose universality has practically been attained, is certainly the cornerstone of all of these efforts. Today the question of violence against women is finally spoken of publicly and is less and less tolerated. In Côte d'Ivoire, several steps have been taken.

With respect to the legal protection of women, laws against female genital mutilation, sexual harassment and forced marriage have been enacted; the Government of Côte d'Ivoire and the various associations involved are working to promote these laws but are faced with socio-cultural obstacles. Unfortunately, domestic violence continues to be perceived as normal in our societies. Despite the consensus obtained, massive awareness campaigns are necessary, and to that end we regularly organize, in partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund and the non-governmental organizations, a number of awareness and training workshops.

Thanks to the women's movement in Côte d'Ivoire, violence against women is no longer trivialized. A centre for victims of domestic violence has been established at the initiative of organizations to protect women, and two other centres are about to be opened by my department. For the first time in our country, a national committee to combat violence against women has been established, involving all ministerial departments and the non-governmental organizations to combat violence against women.

As soon as it attained independence, Côte d'Ivoire abolished polygamy. Monogamy is now the only legally recognized system of marriage in our country.

There remain discriminatory laws, which are in the process of being repealed. I cannot forget the children victims of transborder trafficking, for whom we have been caring for a few months now. Massive denunciation campaigns are taking place, and the process of repatriation has begun and will be accelerated.

The economic advancement of women involves access to micro-credit through the Women and Development Fund. We have set up groups of village women with a view to including them in agricultural production activities. That Fund benefits women; it offers the best reimbursement rate compared to other national social funds, with an average equal to at least 25 per cent.

The Microstart programme, which has been carried out in 25 countries of the world, has also been of benefit to Côte d'Ivoire. An amount of 850 million CFA francs has been earmarked to improve the access to micro-credit of small, low-income entrepreneurs.

The promotion of literacy among women, the training of more than 1,000 rural organizers who are active in Côte d'Ivoire and the provision of technical training has helped illiterate women obtain employment.

While notable progress has been made with regard to improving the health of women and children, problems are being encountered in the area of reproductive health. With regard to the struggle against HIV/AIDS, our country has opted to protect women by means of education and social mobilization campaigns. Measures based on prevention have been taken by the Government in cooperation with the non-governmental organizations involved in the fight against this pandemic and with associations of people living with HIV.

All of these plans initiated by the Government of Côte d'Ivoire have been supplemented by the elaboration of a national action plan for women, which is an integral part of Côte d'Ivoire's development strategies and goals for the period 2000-2005.

In preparing for this session, women's organizations determined that women should make up at least 30 per cent of representative bodies. In order to achieve this, they believe that in addition to a proactive policy, solidarity among the women themselves is necessary, as is an ongoing commitment from all the parties concerned.

Five years after Beijing, we are meeting today to take stock of the commitments made by our States. Despite the progress I have just mentioned, can we say that women in the year 2000 are better educated, in better health, more fulfilled in their families and in society, and playing a more important role than in the past? With respect to the people we represent here, we must humbly recognize that we are far from having attained those objectives.

In fact, women's participation in political and economic decision-making has increased only slightly. Laws have not always been applied. Sexist clichés and acts of discrimination against women continue to hamper action towards gender equality. Adjustments required by economic and financial restructuring have significantly reduced investments in human capital and have increased the misery of the most vulnerable sectors of the population, in particular that of poor women.

External factors whose impact we had not gauged accurately with regard to women's policy have diminished the efforts of Governments and other actors. This is the case with regard to the galloping spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, as well as with the growing number of conflicts and civil wars, whose victims are generally women and children.

The most indebted States are forced to reduce their social expenditures considerably, with women being the main victims. In fact, how can a country like Côte d'Ivoire — which allocates 52 per cent of its budget for external debt repayment — raise sufficient resources to finance measures benefiting women? The international community must therefore find a definitive solution to this thorny problem of the debt burden; otherwise our commitments may become only wishful thinking.

Last 24 December, our country experienced a change of political regime that has been welcomed by the vast majority of the people of Côte d'Ivoire. The National Public Health Committee, which was established on that date with General Robert Guéï as its head, is currently working with the transition Government to establish a new society in Côte d'Ivoire that is based on the rule of law and respect for individual and collective liberties. In the coming weeks the Committee will put in place democratic and transparent structures, which are *sine qua non* conditions for sustainable development and the effective advancement of women. More than ever before, women today make up an undeniable force that has made its presence felt in daily life and has made itself understood and respected. The composition of the delegation that I lead is an illustration of this.

Next 23 July, a consensus Constitution will be the subject of a referendum. That Constitution makes reference in its preamble, for the first time in the history of our country, to the rights of women, and it enjoys almost complete support from all political parties. The general elections that will restore civilian rule will be held in the last quarter of this year.

In this period of renewal, we appeal to the goodwill of all at the bilateral and multilateral levels to support our efforts to succeed in this transition, so that Côte d'Ivoire can resume its economic and social progress to bring about the stability of the country and of the West African subregion.

The full participation of women in the development process, and the elimination of all forms of discrimination on the basis of gender, must be priority objectives for all Governments and for the entire international community. We have great hope in the work of this special session.

With the year 2000, we are steadfastly entering a new era. Let us ensure that this era will see women gain an equal footing with men. The women of Côte d'Ivoire will be present.

The President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Diarra Afoussatou Thiero, Minister for the Advancement of Women of Mali.

Mrs. Thiero (Mali) (*spoke in French*): I would first of all like to join those who have congratulated you so warmly, Mr. President, on the confidence that has been placed in you in presiding over this special session. I would also like to congratulate your colleagues on the Bureau. On behalf of the delegation of Mali, I wish you all every success. The delegation that I have the honour to lead remains at your disposal to support you in your difficult task.

At the end of the World Conference in Beijing, my Government adopted a plan of action in 1995 for the advancement of women during the period 1996-2000. This plan, which was strongly inspired by the Beijing Platform and the African plan of action, focused on seven priority areas: education, health, economic advancement, women's rights, environment, participation in public life and institutional strengthening. In the document that we have made available to the special session, we outlined the results that have been achieved in these various areas, as well as the obstacles we face and our future prospects.

To summarize those elements, I would simply like to review Mali's specific characteristics and to underscore certain particular points.

With regard to education, literacy and training, education has generally seen considerable improvement in the course of the last five years. The enrolment rate of girls in primary education has increased from 31.3 per cent to 36.5 per cent. Despite this considerable improvement in girls' schooling levels, much remains to be done. This is why various partners are assisting Mali in that arduous task through various programmes and projects. In the same period, female literacy has increased from 9.8 per cent to 12.1 per cent.

In order to deal with the limitations of the traditional education system, the Government of Mali has designed Development Education Centres, in which parity is required in giving girls and boys who have either not been to or dropped out of school the intellectual and practical training they need in various aspects of socio-economic activity, as well as in giving rural residents the knowledge and skills necessary to become modern producers.

Like the Development Education Centres, the Village Development Education Centres and village schools are designed for children between 9 and 15 years of age. In addition to reading, writing and arithmetic, students also learn vocational skills in the three years they are enrolled. Migrant girls receive literacy education, as well as training in such areas as domestic skills, childcare and home economics, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS, and vocational matters.

Existing vocational training centres teach young girls and women metal working, auto mechanics, electrical trades, fashion design and sewing, hospitality trades, and so on. The programme has plans for nine new centres, which should increase the capacity for providing technical training programmes for women at least five-fold.

With regard to strengthening skills, specialized training for women has been organized by the Ministry for the Advancement of Women, Children and the Family, in cooperation with its bilateral and multilateral partners and non-governmental organizations, in the areas of gender and law, financial management in entrepreneurship, and so on.

A very important event in the area of health was the 1991 adoption of the health and population sector policy. With the establishment of community health associations, at the centre of which women are active participants, there has been a considerable improvement in health among the population. Health nevertheless continues to be a matter of concern, as Mali is still classified among the countries with the highest rates of infant, child and maternal mortality.

For over five years, we have been seeing an improvement in health indicators for women and children. This is no doubt the logical result of the investment efforts made by the Government and other actors in development. In 1997, the Ministry of Health, Older Persons and Solidarity developed with its partners a 10-year health and social development plan.

The first sectoral investment programme of this social development plan for 1998 to 2002 — the health and social development programme — gives high

priority to choice in connection with reproductive health.

But despite such progress, the rates of mortality and morbidity — at 577 per 100,000 — continue to be a concern. Although, at 3 per cent, the incidence of HIV/AIDS has not yet reached alarming proportions, it nonetheless requires close attention. Practices harmful to the health of women and children persist in spite of information and awareness campaigns carried out by the Government and by non-governmental organizations. To halt these practices, a national action committee to combat practices harmful to the health of women and children was established by the Prime Minister in 1997; in coordination with the Government, the committee will formulate strategies and actions to be implemented.

Economic advancement remains a key element in the advancement of women with a view to the gradual attainment of autonomy and hence the improvement of the status of women at home and within society at large. Since 1995, decentralized financing systems, from which women benefit, have evolved in Mali. Moreover, there are no further legal or institutional obstacles to a woman's access to land, although in practice that right is not yet enjoyed in some parts of the country.

Participation of women in public life is notable both in terms of the number of women and of the positions they hold. Thirty-six per cent of the members of the Government are women; the first 12 women mayors of communes have just been elected; and women constitute 12 per cent of parliament. But much remains to be done with respect to the participation of women in public life and in decision-making.

Promotion of women's rights with a view to ensuring that women play an effective role as citizens has been a primary focus of our ongoing activities, such as: the establishment of legal clinics; the creation of many associations for the promotion or defence of women's rights; the upcoming formulation of a family code that will revise certain discriminatory provisions of the marriage, guardianship and filiation codes; and the formulation and implementation, jointly by the Government and by non-governmental organizations, of a plan to combat violence against women. The creation of spaces for free expression, such as the so-called space for democratic inquiry, provides an opportunity for individuals or civil society at large to publicly question the Government about violations of their rights.

The strengthening of institutions is a priority area and a keystone of any policy for the advancement of women. A major achievement of the period in question was the 1997 creation of the Ministry for the Advancement of Women, Children and the Family. A significant step towards better integrating women's concerns into development policies and programmes has been the appointment of a technical adviser to the Prime Minister on gender issues and the imminent appointment of technical counsellors on gender in the Ministries of Education, Health, Justice, Rural Development, Territorial and Community Administration, and Employment and Professional Training. There are many projects in support of the institutional development not only of public services but also of associations and non-governmental organizations, with a view to strengthening their capabilities.

The creation of systems for dialogue and participation is a way of enhancing multisectoral cooperation and partnership with civil-society associations and organizations. In that connection I would mention our inter-ministerial committee, our joint commission of the Government and non-governmental organizations, and the national action committee to combat practices harmful to the health of women and children.

It would be hard to list all our achievements. Yet despite the encouraging results so far, there are indications that a gap remains between men and women in all areas. The high level of illiteracy among women and girls, along with Mali's economic constraints, are obstacles to the advancement of women.

My country has made significant progress in a number of areas, but further efforts are needed to ensure that all women have access to education, good health and resources.

The President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Katrin Saks, Minister for Population and Ethnic Affairs of Estonia.

Mrs. Saks (Estonia): Gender equality is not just a question of equality between the two sexes; it is also a question of human rights, democracy and development for the entire population.

I would like to start with the argument that in several spheres women actually manage much better than men in Estonia.

An average Estonian woman generally has attained a higher educational level than an average Estonian man. Among Estonians aged 20 to 60, 20 per cent of women and only 14 per cent of men have higher education. Statistics show that women are also in the majority among those studying for post-graduate degrees. Women live 10 years longer than men in Estonia. Recent surveys show that our young unmarried women are better off than men: they earn higher salaries and are more satisfied with their lives than men are. Looking at a similar group, but 10 years older, we see a more traditional picture: such women's salaries are 70 per cent of the average; their total workload is as high as men's or even higher; and they are more concerned about themselves and about the lives of their families than men are.

Unfortunately, a longer lifetime does not always mean more satisfaction for women; a higher educational level often does not mean higher status or position or a better salary. It is thus obvious that there is a need to change the behaviour, attitudes, norms and values which define and influence gender roles: to change them through education, the media, the arts, culture and science. The stereotyped traditional role of a woman as a homemaker and mother, and motherhood itself, are the main obstacles to equality. If a choice between family and work has to be made, there are more women who choose family.

The second important obstacle is attitude. It is mainly attitudes that fuel discrimination, especially in the labour market. Men have nothing against earning a higher salary and having less housework to do. Surveys have proved that almost every fourth man considers the traditional division of housework to be normal. Women in turn often act according to the expectations of men. They are afraid to ask for a higher salary, to take on a more responsible position or to force men to become more involved in housekeeping. When talking about equality we sometimes feel that the key to equality is in the hands of men.

As in most modern societies, there has been a sharp fall in the birth rate in Estonia. This is a response by women to increased stress and tension. Estonia has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world. Why do many women not have children? Because having children is not the social norm any more, and because of the burden of having a family, fertility has become more selective. Having the right partner is a very important factor in childbearing; after economic and housing reasons, that is the third reason why women in Estonia prefer not to have children. That means that if there are to be more children we should teach men how to cope with a democratic lifestyle in society and in the family.

Attitudes concerning gender equality are changing. Open-mindedness is spreading among the younger generation. New views about stereotypes are especially common among younger women. In the future, special stress should be put on training younger men, using different methods to achieve a real change in mentality. This is what I had in mind when I said that, for Estonia, the key to equality is in men's hands. The key is in men's attitudes, not only to the new roles of women but, mainly, to their own roles in life.

Having spoken so far about the problems, I would now like to speak about the progress we have made and how the role of women in Estonian society has grown. In this context, I would like to stress the important and supportive role of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The role women play in politics has increased, but it is not yet sufficient. In 1999, a big step was taken in treating women equally in politics. More women were elected to Parliament and they received more votes than ever before. There are 18 women among the 101 members of the Estonian Parliament. At the local council elections in 1999, 28 per cent of those elected were women — and they were elected before the existing quota system was in place. Two of the 15 Cabinet ministers are ladies. Another good example here is the role women have in our foreign service. As from this year, one fourth of Estonian ambassadors will be women.

I would like to stress here the ability of female politicians to cooperate among themselves — it is remarkable. The Association of Parliamentary Women was created in 1998. It brought together all the female deputies from different parties. In the Parliament, the group serves as a watchdog and supporter of gender-related legislation.

Several political round tables of women have been established in recent years. Equality policies are carried out by various institutions. The Bureau of

Equality, within the Ministry of Social Affairs, is acting in close cooperation with different national and international institutions. A Women's Training Centre and two women's study centres have been established, and many seminars and training courses have been organized, supported by UNDP, the International Labour Organization and the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Within the context of international cooperation, Estonia has participated in a Nordic-Baltic working group and in the Femina Baltica network. A lot of material relating to the issue of equality have been prepared in the Estonian language.

We have observed the remarkable growth of women's organizations. The growing broad political interest in gender issues is also very important. A couple of months ago, the Cabinet decided to give its consent to the creation of the Estonian Gender Equality Law, admitting that the situation needs to be regulated at the legal level. This was a serious step towards a recognition of the existence of the problem at the governmental level. This does not immediately entail a change in public opinion, but it is certainly a landmark in the overall development of gender equality in Estonia.

With regard to new challenges and remaining obstacles, we must combine strategies to face new situations, such as globalization, Euro-integration and free trade, with old issues that are still very much alive. Issues such as the pay gap, a strongly segregated labour market, the small number of women in decision-making positions, domestic violence and stereotyped images of women and men remain on the gender equality agenda.

If we are to achieve equality, it will be necessary to take a holistic approach, including having an open discussion about gender roles for men so as to find new ways to define masculinity.

Training in the field of gender equality is the key factor in further development. This activity has to be based on social science research, the expertise of specialists and the data necessary to monitor social processes. The rise of the fathers' movement and the beginning of men's research in Estonia proves that the formation of new, action-oriented institutions for both men and women, has had great impact.

We women never achieve anything if we try to solve only our own problems. The problems must be solved together, by men and by women, in a way that will satisfy both parties.

The President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Ms. Zahra Shojaie, Adviser to the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Head of the Centre for Women's Participation.

Ms. Shojaie (Islamic Republic of Iran) (*spoke in Persian; English text furnished by the delegation*): The five-year review conference is, indeed, a very propitious opportunity to take stock of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, evaluate the accomplishments made thus far and the obstacles encountered along the way, identify the challenges ahead and look for further initiatives and measures to meet these challenges and to ensure the sustainable progress of women in the years and decades to come. Looking back at Beijing, it can hardly be disputed that the Conference dealt with a wide range of important and extremely sensitive issues, many of which are shared by all, and some of which are not.

The intensity of the ongoing negotiations on the text of the final outcome of the review conference is, if nothing else, a vivid reminder to all of us in the international community of the fact that we still have to deal with the same important issues and also that our common effort towards achieving consensus should continue. Moreover, the state of negotiations is also indicative of the formidable challenges the international community is facing in grappling with the question of how to better implement the Beijing outcome and commitments, at both the national and international levels. This daunting task is being rendered much more difficult by the negative aspects of the globalization process, particularly in the developing world.

The Beijing Conference was a significant and substantial step forward in our collective endeavours to address various areas of women's issues and to agree on a set of practical actions and measures. Its outcome represented a delicate compromise among competing value systems and outlooks on such sensitive concepts and issues as family, marriage, sexuality and reproduction, which play a central role in the life of all societies.

Since these concepts involve long-established, universal and fundamental ethical principles and values, they simply cannot be subjected to a post-modern, laissez-faire mentality and approach, particularly when such an approach is espoused by the smaller part of the human community. On this specific point, I want to be absolutely clear: given the existing differences on the definition, interpretation and application of fundamental concepts as regards the status and rights of women, as individuals, in the family and in society, future success on a global scale in making further progress on women and their situation requires earnest collective efforts towards a common normative framework. Such a common normative framework should derive from various existing value systems and should ensure the fundamental human rights of women and their equity and equality with men.

From an Islamic perspective, a traditional outlook based on the erroneous notion of superiority of men over women does injustice not only to women but to men and humanity as a whole. Equally nefarious is the view that disregards the innate differences between men and women. Both men and women are valuable components of humanity, each possessing equally their respective characteristics and potentials for intellectual, social, cultural and political development, which are complementary and mutually reinforcing, certainly not competing, let alone antagonistic. The definition and construction of relationships between men and women, both at the level of family and the society at large, on the basis of complementarity of respective functions and roles, cooperation and participation, is certainly conducive to the realization of their innate potentialities and the development of a more humane order. Within this perspective, the centrality of family as the basic unit of society should be emphasized and accorded due attention. It is from this vantage point that we approach various issues on the agenda and formulate our position on the specific provisions being negotiated.

A realistic assessment of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action indicates that despite progress in some areas, many of the agreed targets and set objectives have yet to be achieved, both at national and international levels. The situation needs to be redressed. Over and above the articulation of positions and exchange of polemics, necessary and even inevitable as they may be considered, however, this session should devote itself to devising practical ways and means to promote respect for women's rights and elevate their status in a real sense, facilitate and institutionalize their empowerment, ensure their meaningful participation in all aspects of social life and effectively prevent violation of their rights and dignity, both within the family and at the level of society. The achievement of these objectives, needless to say, requires the adoption of initiatives and measures towards creating an enabling and mutually supportive environment at the national as well as the international level.

Let me now turn to the national scene. Since having actively participated in the Beijing Conference and made its contribution to the final outcome, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has vigorously pursued the implementation of the Platform for Action. Nevertheless, difficulties and challenges in various areas are yet to be addressed and overcome. The promotion of the status and rights of women and their empowerment has been an integral part of the policy of President Khatami's Administration since it took office in August 1997. The concurrent policy devoted to the expansion of civil society and the institutionalization of its role at the national level has also contributed to a more active engagement of and participation by women in different walks of social and political life. The still ongoing popular reform process within Iranian society, which is aimed at transforming various aspects and dimensions of our social and political life within the framework of the Constitution, has much to do with women's issues. In fact, Iranian women, along with youth, played a paramount role in the 1997 presidential elections. This critical role was further continued in the nationwide elections of the city and village councils in early 1999, as well as recently in the parliamentary elections in February 2000, where candidates running on the reform platform gained the majority of seats.

Our overall policy regarding women, based on the exalted precepts and values of Islam, as well as the letter and spirit of the Constitution, has been pursued through the following measures: appointment of women to senior decision-making posts, including two at the Cabinet level; promotion of education at all levels; provision of necessary services, particularly in the area of health and family planning; establishment and promotion of commissions for women's affairs; identification of the problems and obstacles impeding

women's advancement and promulgation of necessary relevant legislation. As recently as last week, for the first time, a woman deputy was appointed to the Bureau of the new Parliament. Another important measure relates to the inclusion of gender perspective in the Third Five-Year National Development Plan, for 2000-2004. Within the framework of the Plan, special attention has been paid to the objective of the promotion of women's status, including through increased allocation to the annual budget for women's affairs at national, provincial and local levels. The provision of financial support to women heads of household and to rural women has been another measure in this respect.

The betterment of the situation of women in various fields, in all societies and on a global scale, calls for the resolute will and determination of the entire human community. The effective combating of different forms of violation of women's rights and their protection against all forms of violence and abuse requires action at the national level and cooperation at the international level. Conflict resolution and promotion and the establishment of peace and tranquillity in the first place, and the achievement of long-term, comprehensive and humane development are among the requisite conditions to this end. It should be further underlined that the effective and meaningful empowerment of women in all societies, particularly in the developing world, depends first and foremost on the achievement of development and the eradication of poverty.

If history is any indication, long-term peace and stability can be achieved only through tolerance and understanding among all societies, cultures and peoples. We believe that a dialogue among civilizations, as proposed by President Khatami and endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly, based on the central notion of cultural diversity, constitutes the suitable framework for arriving at such an understanding.

To close, may I avail myself of the unique opportunity of this historic review conference in the millennium year to appeal to all to join hands in solidarity, to rise to the challenge and to make a commitment, individually and collectively, to make the life of all women around the globe a humane and fulfilling experience in the years and decades ahead. Let us resolve not to be found wanting in this solemn commitment.

The President: I call on His Excellency The Honourable Noah Katana Ngala, Minister for Home Affairs, Heritage and Sports of Kenya.

Mr. Ngala (Kenya): At the outset, Mr. President, allow me to express my delegation's satisfaction at seeing you preside over this important session. I am confident that, under your able leadership and wise guidance, the session will have a successful outcome. I would like to assure you of my delegation's full support and cooperation during the session.

Since the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women, held at Nairobi in 1985, the Kenyan Government, in recognition of the existing gender inequalities at all levels of society, has initiated various interventions and strategies and created a conducive environment aimed at correcting these imbalances. The Government's commitment has been further demonstrated by the endeavour to honour its obligations to the various international conventions and declarations to which it is party, particularly the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Vienna Declaration on human rights and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action.

My statement seeks to highlight the efforts that the Government and civil society have made towards the implementation of the Platform for Action, with special emphasis on new developments that have taken place and the proposed initiatives and actions on the way forward.

Today, I am pleased to report that the National Policy on Gender and Development has been approved by the Cabinet. The Policy proposes the establishment of a gender commission to restructure and strengthen the existing national machinery in order to enhance gender responsive programming and planning. The Policy, together with the national plan of action, will provide a regulatory framework for the advancement of gender equity in the country. The Government, in conformity with the recommendations of the African and Beijing Platforms for Action, hosted a national stakeholders forum on 10-11 May 2000, which strengthened the existing partnerships with non-governmental organizations and development partners and created a national forum to debate advancing the goals of gender equality and development.

With about 43 per cent of the population living in absolute poverty, it has become a challenge for Kenya to achieve and sustain rapid economic development with the full participation of the poor. The situation has largely been due to increasing inequality in the distribution of resources, economic recession, adverse weather conditions, rapid population growth and globalization. All these have negatively impacted on the growth rate of Kenya's gross domestic product, which declined from 4.8 per cent in 1995 to 1.4 per cent last year. The Government has responded to this situation by, among other initiatives, formulating a national poverty eradication plan 1999-2015, which aims at reducing the sector of the population affected by absolute poverty to less than 30 per cent by the year 2010. The plan is targeted to reach the most vulnerable groups in society, in particular women, youth and children.

Positive achievements made in the health sector since independence have been eroded following the introduction of structural adjustment programmes, an overall decline in food availability and an increased incidence of HIV/AIDS, which has drastically increased the mortality rates for both children and adults and further intensified poverty, particularly among women and children. In this regard, the Government has declared HIV/AIDS a national disaster and has set up a national AIDS control council, through which HIV/AIDS control units have been established. The Government also proposes to publish a draft bill of laws affecting situations related to the AIDS scourge. The bill seeks to examine the family succession laws so as to protect women and children.

In the area of adolescent health, special clinics for youths have been set up to cater to their health and reproductive needs and a national plan of action on female genital mutilation has been further developed. It is also significant to note that the Government has reaffirmed its commitment to improving the health and social well-being of women and children by strengthening maternal and health services through the decentralization of health-care service delivery to the district and community levels.

The Government has continued to give high priority to education, which absorbs about 30 per cent of the fiscal budget. Concerted efforts are being made to improve the quality and reach of services and to achieve gender parity as a way of meeting the goal of universal primary education by the year 2010. Already, gender parity in enrolment has been achieved at the primary school level, with 49.3 per cent for girls and 50.3 per cent for boys. However, education costs, early marriages and pregnancies have had an adverse effect on girls' education and female enrolment at the tertiary level therefore continues to be below 30 per cent.

Among the positive interventions in place is the review of curricula, education materials, teacher attitudes and classroom interactions, together with massive gender awareness at all levels, to eliminate negative cultural attitudes towards girls. More significant is the establishment of bursary schemes by Government and non-governmental organizations to address the education needs of needy boys and girls. At the university level, the Government has introduced affirmative action by lowering girls' cut-off points by a mark, thus increasing enrolment of girls in state universities by 200. Gender-training programmes are being conducted at institutes and centres established in public universities, some of which are already offering undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes in gender and development.

Although women in Kenya constitute more than half of the population — 51 per cent — they continue to have inadequate access to ownership of assets, social and economic services and participation in making decisions affecting their lives. It is estimated that less than five per cent of Kenyan women own land, which is stated as the most critical factor causing poverty among female-headed households. In an effort to improve this situation, the Government, in collaboration with non-governmental organizations, is currently reviewing relevant laws pertaining to ownership, access to productive resources as a way of strengthening the role of women in ensuring household food security, access to land and other essential resources, including farm inputs.

Kenya condemns and perceives violence against women and girls as the most pervasive violation of universal human rights principles. In this regard, sustained efforts and campaigns have been undertaken, with the media taking the leading role in highlighting incidents of domestic violence and advocating the review of rape laws with a view to meting out stiffer penalties to sexual offenders. A draft bill on sexual offences has been presented to the Attorney General for action.

Among other notable initiatives is the establishment of woman-friendly police desks, to be replicated countrywide as one way of dealing with cases of domestic violence. It has also been found necessary to train and sensitize members of the police force to domestic and other forms of gender violence. The process of establishing a family court is also at an advanced stage. It is anticipated that the domestic violence legislation — family protection — once passed, will go a long way towards changing the course of domestic violence in Kenya. Currently, Kenya is exploring the modalities of establishing model legislation on domestic violence. This is being jointly undertaken by the Commonwealth, the Government, non-governmental organizations and development partners.

As mentioned earlier, women in Kenya make up 52 per cent of voters. However, they are not adequately represented in political decision-making positions. For instance, only 4 per cent of Parliament members are women. Women represent only 8 per cent of local authorities; 23 per cent of senior administrative positions; only 15.2 per cent of heads of diplomatic missions; and only 30 per cent of the judiciary. As a result of this situation, the Government and non-governmental organizations have embarked on civil awareness campaigns, lobbying and advocacy countrywide.

At the political level, I am pleased to report that Parliament recently passed the affirmative action motion, which seeks a 30 per cent representation by women in the National Assembly and local authorities. Already a draft bill is being developed jointly by the Government and non-governmental organizations. It is anticipated that once the bill is enacted, the empowerment of women will begin to gain acceptance by the society as a whole and pave the way for a more balanced representation in key decision-making bodies in the country.

Another key development is the drafting of the equality bill, which has been submitted to the Attorney-General. The bill seeks to promote the welfare of all Kenyans and it outlaws discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, creed, marital status, handicap, family status, sex, age or colour. Kenya has also prepared the third and fourth comprehensive national reports on the implementation status of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

I would like to conclude by stating that the national machinery, in collaboration with civil society, is currently developing a comprehensive evaluation and monitoring framework, with indicators as measurement tools. This framework, which is based on the Beijing Platform for Action, will form the basis for assessing progress made towards gender equity. The Kenya Government has also taken a central role in forging stronger relations with development partners as one sure way of translating the Beijing Platform for Action into reality. This collaboration is expected to enhance mobilization of the decreasing resources and create a more focused approach in bringing about equitable and sustainable development in Kenya. Stronger networks will also be forged with partners at the regional and international levels, with the objective of seeking new and more effective ways of advancing the status of women.

The President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Maha Qanout, Minister of Culture of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mrs. Qanout (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): It gives me great pleasure to pay tribute to you, Sir, and to your friendly country, Namibia, and to congratulate you on your election to the presidency of this important session. I would like also to thank the Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, for his introductory statement. Our thanks also go to the Chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women for her efforts to realize the objectives of this session.

Allow me first of all to convey to you the greetings of Mr. Hafez Al-Assad, President of the Syrian Arab Republic, and his sincere wishes that your work be crowned with success so that the session can achieve its declared objectives.

Our meeting today, five years after Beijing, came as a response to an urgent need to collectively evaluate our performance and review our plans. Where do we stand today, and what have we done since we last met in Beijing? Have we hitched our wagons to the stars, in pursuit of a dream or a promise? Did we get so carried away by the Beijing euphoria that we forgot that the road we were about to travel was not exactly paved with flowers? Have we done anything to alleviate the fear and poverty that plague the world or to reassure those who need to be reassured? Have the women of the world stood hand in hand against attempts to

compromise their achievements and hinder their advancement, or will this stagnant melody remain a sad refrain echoed by women all over the world?

The need for women to stand united and determined is more urgent today than ever before. Ignorance and socio-economic pressures will threaten not only what has been achieved so far by women but also our human achievements for years to come.

For women in my country, this session is the translation into reality of a determination that did not falter and a perseverance that cannot be compromised. It is yet another sure step towards the inevitable progress. We have set for ourselves lofty objectives: equality, development and peace. Equality in this sense means what the world does to level the playing fields for women and men so as to provide women with equal opportunities. We are prejudiced neither against women nor against men. We are seeking justice for both. Recognition should be based on merit and competence.

Fairness dictates that men and women assume their responsibilities and face challenges together. It is unfair for some to assume that they are entitled to ride in the carriage and expect those who are already overburdened by life's responsibilities to do the pulling.

For equality to be genuine, we must guarantee equal opportunities, fairness, freedom from oppression and uncompromised rights. In Syria, we take pride in our achievements in favour of women. Under the guidance and sound policies of President Hafez Al-Assad, women's issues assume a primary importance in all spheres of life. The relationship between men and women in our country is no longer one between two opposite parties, one subservient to the other. It is a relationship among equals whereby both men and women work as counterparts with the same sense of purpose, motivated by a desire to serve our country and promote our national interests. Men and women are treated equally under labour laws that enshrine the principle of equal pay for equal work. Employment opportunities are also equally guaranteed for both men and women. Men and women in my country are making strenuous efforts to face together the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Development is the main concern of women and men in Syria. Women may even feel that they have to redouble their efforts because of a humanitarian heritage that has sharpened their sense of responsibility, motivating them to join the bandwagon and compete with men in all walks of life. We depend on ourselves to realize social development. We instil in our children — girls and boys alike — the sacred principle that the individual is the means and the end of all human endeavour. In Syria, primary education is mandatory. Education is free for all — boys and girls, men and women, without distinction, throughout its different stages. Health care is almost free for all. Legislation has been enacted to guarantee women's participation on an equal footing with men in the process of social and economic development. Women's efforts for advancement are unhindered.

The implementation of the post-Beijing national strategy for women and of pluralistic economic policies has empowered women to increase their participation in the economic activities of their country and boosted their contribution to national production.

A committee for women industrial entrepreneurs was established in mid-1999 to streamline and integrate women's efforts in Syrian industry.

The presence of Syrian Arab women is clearly felt at all levels of power and decision-making. There are women ministers, and women hold high positions in the army, police and party leadership structures. In the legislative branch of the Government, the proportion of women delegates to the National Assembly increased from 9.6 per cent in 1995 to 10.4 per cent in 1998. Also in 1998, a woman was appointed attorney general for the first time, thus boosting the presence of women at the highest levels of decision-making.

Grass-roots organizations and civil society actively participate in the development of our society. There is no doubt that the Federation of Syrian Women has played an important role in advancing and increasing awareness of women's issues and in integrating their concerns into the national agenda. The Federation was instrumental in improving women's opportunities in education and training, which has in turn enabled women to contribute more effectively to achieving the economic, social, cultural and political development of Syria.

Peace is a primary concern and preoccupation of women in Syria. Women are the first victims of Israel's persistent violation of any attempts to translate the dream of peace into tangible reality. While alleging that it is working for peace in the Middle East, Israel

refuses to implement the Madrid terms of reference, namely, relevant Security Council resolutions and the principle of land for peace. Those are the basis of the peace process, without which it will be impossible to realize a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

Syrian Arab women in the Golan are the first victims of Israeli occupation. Israel violates their human rights and subjects them to all sorts of violence and oppression. This is unfortunately also the fate of our Palestinian sisters who remain under Israeli occupation. That occupation is in stark violation of the Charter of the United Nations, the principles of international humanitarian law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

We renew our commitment to a just and comprehensive peace. That, to us, is a strategic choice. It should be Israel's choice as well. We also declare that we will not give up an inch of our national soil. From this rostrum, we urge the international community to support Syria's demand for the implementation of United Nations resolutions, in particular resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

We affirm the need for Israel to withdraw fully from the occupied Syrian Golan, to the 4 June 1967 line, in order to allow comprehensive and just peace to prevail. That peace will guarantee our rights and our dignity, and will give the region a chance to savour stability and allow life to return to normalcy after the destruction caused by war and aggression.

I am confident that the international community knows all too well that people of free will shall endure as long as the occupation continues; their will shall not be defeated. We have seen proof of this in the case of Lebanon, which stayed the course and persevered in the south of that country in the face of Israeli aggression. The valiant people of southern Lebanon at long last triumphed over the Israeli aggressors, who were defeated and had to withdraw. Let us all salute the people and the women of southern Lebanon, as well as that country's victory.

May God Almighty assist us in realizing the aspirations of women, societies and all human beings, wherever they may be.

The President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Angelina Muganza, Minister for Gender and Women's Development of Rwanda.

Mrs. Muganza (Rwanda): First and foremost, allow me, on behalf of the Rwandan delegation, to start by congratulating you, Mr. President, on your election to chair and guide this important special session. Indeed, it is an honour and pleasure to address this session on behalf of the Government of Rwanda and to share Rwanda's experience on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action five years after its adoption.

Five years ago, nations gathered in Beijing to review the status of women and to map out new strategies to increase Governments' commitment to the advancement of women and to gender equality. At that time, Rwanda was emerging from genocide, the worst of its kind in Africa in the last millennium. Despite the trauma and loss, the people of Rwanda, and particularly its women, stood up to this challenge and joined the rest of the world in pledging their commitment to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Rwanda had been reduced to ashes by Rwandans, regrettably, while the whole world watched. By the time Rwandan women and men joined the rest of the world in Beijing, we were continuously being advised by those who seemed to care for us that we Rwandans could no longer live together. I am pleased to say that the Rwandan Government of National Unity has made a choice to reconcile all Rwandans and to promote the politics of inclusion. We presently live together in peace.

Allow me to briefly present the situation of Rwandan women after the 1994 genocide. Presently, women constitute 54 per cent of the Rwandan population. Women, most of whom are illiterate and therefore have limited employment opportunities and financial ability to take care of their families, head 37 per cent of Rwandan households. Seventy per cent of the Rwandan population is living below the poverty line, and a large proportion of them are women.

It is against this background that the Rwandan Government of National Unity has demonstrated its unreserved political will to promote the advancement of women and to attain gender equality in all spheres of life, despite the socio-economic challenges resulting from the genocide and its effects. That political will

has created an environment that enables the women of Rwanda, non-governmental organizations and development agencies to implement the Beijing Platform for Action.

Allow me now to highlight some of the major achievements and gains of the five years since Beijing. At the institutional level, the national machinery for the advancement of women and the promotion of gender equality was created and progressively upgraded to a focused Ministry of Gender and Women's Development with a clear mandate. The Ministry of Gender and Women's Development has, among other things, undertaken capacity-building in gender training and mainstreaming for its staff and key partners within the Government and civil society.

Gender sensitization for policy makers has been implemented at the level of the legislature, the executive branch and local government. This has created an enabling environment for the implementation of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action. Secondly, the Ministry has facilitated the development of gender focal points in various institutions, and broken the resistance to the cause of gender equality and women's advancement. The process of engendering the development process is ongoing and covers sector ministries, commissions, civil society, the private sector and decentralized organs of government.

The national machinery plays an advocacy role and mobilizes resources at different levels so as to enable Rwandan women to meet their day-to-day practical needs, such as shelter, food and other necessities, along with addressing the strategic interests of women. Women have played an active part in taking care of thousands of orphans left behind by the genocide. Women have been able to participate in non-traditional roles such as house construction and community and national politics, to mention but a few.

Rwandan women, with the support of the national machinery, have embarked on a process of political empowerment. They have elected women's councils from the village level right up to the national level. A national council secretariat is being set up and strengthened to serve as the technical arm of the national women's councils. Capacity-building is required to make the secretariat operational and dynamic. The overall goal of these women's councils is to prepare women to participate in decision-making at all levels and to give them the necessary forum in which to air their views and aspirations and in which to work together to solve national problems.

A capacity-building process for the women's councils has started and will continue to ensure that their participation at all levels is realized. The voice of women in national political life is becoming increasingly audible, and women's visibility is growing. In the ongoing democratization process in the country, the Government has adopted an affirmative action programme to achieve 30 per cent representation by women in local administrations.

One of the critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action is economic empowerment for women. Besides the financial support channelled through non-governmental women's organizations, women have set up a credit scheme with a revolving fund at the communal level, which was initiated and is managed by women themselves. The national machinery provides some capital contribution and capacity-building for the management committees of these funds. To date, about $1 million has been distributed to 61 per cent of communes by the Government of Rwanda. We thank all friendly countries and United Nations agencies for the financial support they have provided. This scheme targets the poorest families, which have no access to formal lending schemes. The target is to have total coverage by 2001. Alongside this scheme, the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development, in collaboration with the Commercial Bank of Rwanda, has put in place a guarantee fund to support women entrepreneurs.

One of the critical challenges facing Rwandans, and women in particular, is the problem of poverty. This is basically structural in nature but is also a consequence of the 1994 genocide. A programme for formulating a national poverty-reduction strategy has been launched, and women are a part of that programme.

Gender mainstreaming is taking place in national population policy, AIDS control and prevention programmes, unity and reconciliation, National Youth Council programmes and reproductive health programmes, to mention but a few. It is gratifying to note that through gender-awareness raising and advocacy, particularly through the media, resistance to bringing about gender-equitable change is gradually breaking down, and various stakeholders are taking

their own initiatives to mainstream gender in their programmes. Members of parliament have embarked on a nationwide campaign to sensitize the population about gender-based violence and the role of women in national development as a strategy for achieving sustainable development.

The national machinery, with the support of the United Nations Development Programme and the Economic Commission for Africa, will in the next four months or so formulate a framework for developing a national gender policy. The main thrust will be poverty-reduction strategy and the constitution-making process.

In Rwanda, International Women's Day has been used effectively as the proper forum for highlighting important challenges, such as violence against the girl child, poverty and the AIDS pandemic. This has been adopted as this year's theme, with a joint plan of action to address those challenges.

In a bid to protect the legal rights of women and girl children and to ensure equal access and control over property, the Government of Rwanda has passed a law on inheritance, liberalities and succession which gives women and girls the right to succession and inheritance from their spouses and parents. A Commission for Human Rights has been put in place and soon a constitutional review commission will be in place. They will provide an opportunity to fight gender-based violence and discrimination and to develop a new constitution that is gender sensitive.

One of the greatest challenges facing my country and the international community since the 1994 genocide and massacres is to resolve the problem of bringing justice to thousands of genocide suspects, redressing the grievances of genocide survivors and putting an end to the culture of impunity. The conventional courts cannot effectively solve this problem. Hence the revival and restructuring of *gachacha* courts, which constitute a form of participatory justice. Women are playing a vital role in that institution.

Initiatives geared towards improving girls' access to education have been launched. These include promoting quality education for girls by setting up model schools, such as the one established in Kigali by the Rwanda chapter of the Forum for African Women Educationalists. Affirmative action has been adopted in newly established institutes, whereby a certain percentage of the enrolment is women, where that figure had been zero before. In order for the Beijing Platform for Action to be implemented and coordinated effectively, bearing in mind the necessity to set time-bound targets, a national secretariat has been established with a clear mandate to mobilize resources and coordinate the efforts of various stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Platform for Action as a strategy for ensuring maximal impact.

In conclusion, five years down the road from endorsing the Beijing Platform for Action, Rwandan women have registered significant achievements in various fields. These achievements can be attributed the Government's political will and support for the policy of promoting gender equality and the advancement of women as a prerequisite for harmonious and sustainable development. Secondly, it is a result of the existing partnership between Government and civil society and support from the international community, particularly during the critical emergency phases that we have gone through.

Despite these achievements and facilitating factors, many critical challenges to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action remain to be surmounted. High on the agenda are the issues of poverty, the growing HIV/AIDS pandemic, violence against women and the girl child, armed conflicts in the Great Lakes region, the heavy foreign-debt burden and structural adjustment policies that threaten to wipe out some of the achievements realized so far, thus placing women in a more precarious position than before and placing the future of our country in jeopardy. Concrete action must be taken today, not tomorrow, and the momentum of external resource inflow should be kept high.

Allow me to end on this note: by pledging our continued commitment to the advancement of women and gender equality. This should be complemented by the increased support and understanding of the international community in the light of the highly dynamic and challenging global environment.

The President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency The Honourable Sarah Flood-Beaubrund, Minister for Health, Family Affairs, Human Services and Gender Affairs of Saint Lucia.

Ms. Flood-Beaubrun (Saint Lucia): In committing itself to the goal of social justice, the Government of Saint Lucia recognizes that all

development efforts must, of necessity, focus on the advancement of all of its people in an equitable way. The Government also recognizes that gender equity is an inherent component of social justice and that the goal of social justice cannot be realized unless gender equity is achieved through a deliberate and sustained effort.

Since the Beijing Conference in 1995, Saint Lucia has placed particular emphasis on developing an enabling environment to further the goal of gender equity. During this period, action has been concentrated on alleviating poverty among women; improving the health status of women; addressing the problem of gender-based violence; and increasing women's access to power and decision-making at all levels.

A 1995 poverty assessment report identified lack of proper childcare facilities in the poorer communities of our country as a key constraint to women's access training and employment. Since then, there has been an increase in the number of pre-schools and day care centres, from 109 in 1995 to 180 in 1999. This increased number is still proving to be inadequate, as more women are being forced into paid employment. Part of the Government's plan for developing the various communities is the establishment of human resource development centres in major communities. These facilities will accommodate skills training programmes as well as child day-care services. To date, three such centres have been built. Women of Saint Lucia stand to benefit significantly from this initiative.

The Government has also been able to facilitate increases in social security benefits. In 1999, there was an increase in the maternity benefits disbursed through the National Insurance Scheme. Public assistance allowance, given to needy persons, was also increased. Although these increases are still considered inadequate, women, who are the principal care givers and who also constitute the majority of the older population, do benefit from them.

The poverty of women in Saint Lucia is further accentuated by the negative impact of globalization and trade liberalization, specifically the erosion of trade preferences granted to small, vulnerable economies such as ours. As a banana-producing country, Saint Lucia has been adversely affected by the World Trade Organization ruling on the banana regime for African, Caribbean and Pacific countries under the Lomé Convention. Women, many of whom are employed in the banana industry, are particularly affected.

In its proactive approach in dealing with the situation, the Government of Saint Lucia has secured funding from the European Union to implement a social recovery programme to help cushion the effects of the fallout from the banana industry and to prevent the worsening of the poverty situation. The programme, which commenced in 1999, is of five years' duration and focuses on adult education, housing and sanitation, reproductive health care, recreation and sports activity, child protection measures, care of older persons, skills training, land reform and community empowerment activities. Rural women, children and older persons are specifically targeted under this programme. Saint Lucia looks forward to seeing this session adequately address the additional challenges to poverty eradication brought about by globalization and trade liberalization.

Since the Beijing Conference, the Government of Saint Lucia has placed emphasis on increasing access to health care and improving reproductive and mental health services. The removal of user fees for certain health-care services and the establishment of a polyclinic in a highly populated northern section of the country have been among the actions taken to increase access to health care. These activities will be particularly beneficial to women, who are the major users of health services.

The Government of Saint Lucia has embarked on a health sector reform initiative, which is in the initial stages of its implementation. An important principle of the reform initiative is that of equity. Included in the proposal is the recommendation for the use of a gender analysis framework for policy and programme development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

The problems of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS are posing a serious challenge to the health system in Saint Lucia. The latest statistics reveal that the incidence of these diseases among women, particularly young women, is increasing. Saint Lucia has an established national sexually transmitted disease and HIV/AIDS prevention and control programme. A Government-appointed AIDS Action Committee, which has recently been revived, also forms part of the national effort to address the problem of AIDS. In 1999, a non-governmental organization, the Saint Lucia

Association for the Prevention of AIDS, was launched to provide support and assistance to persons afflicted with the AIDS virus. One major achievement of the HIV/AIDS programme is the introduction of a mother-to-child transmission prevention programme, which ensures that AZT is available to pregnant HIV-positive women at no cost to them.

Health prevention and promotion activities are being undertaken both by Government and non-governmental organizations. The Health Information Unit and the Division of Gender Relations continue to promote health issues for women, using various media.

Gender-based violence has been recognized internationally as a public health issue and a violation of human rights. The associated stress, chronic ill health and physical disabilities are real issues that justify the high priority given to them by the Government of Saint Lucia.

With the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act in 1995, efforts have continued at the national and community level to eradicate this scourge in our society. A family court, which was established in 1996, hears cases of domestic violence and offers counselling to clients and perpetrators alike. In 1998, a crisis centre for abused women was opened in the south of the country, increasing the number of such service agencies to two. The Division of Gender Relations and non-governmental organizations continue to mobilize women, men and children to adopt a policy of zero tolerance regarding gender-based violence through its education and awareness programmes. The Division is currently implementing a one-year project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency Gender Equity Fund. The project involves public education, the training of police and community workers in counselling and crisis-intervention skills and the establishment of community teams to respond to cases of gender-based violence.

Funding has been secured from the European Union to implement a comprehensive programme involving three basic strategies: prevention, to include initiatives at the community and national levels, such as community response teams, gender violence units, public education and sensitization; the safety and rehabilitation of victims; and the establishment of a national coordinating committee to initiate and monitor responses to gender-based violence.

A building to house a temporary shelter for abused women and their children has been purchased, and a supporting programme has also been developed. All efforts are being made to establish this centre before the end of this year.

The issue of gender equity in power and decision-making must, as a matter of necessity, include not merely an increase in numbers but an improvement in the quality and level of participation. In 1997, unlike any other period in the history of Saint Lucia, three female candidates contested the general elections, two of whom were successful. Both are now full-fledged government ministers. Also during that year, the first-ever female head of State was appointed. Presently, a record number of four out of twelve permanent secretaries are women, three of whom were appointed within the last two years. No doubt Saint Lucia has a long way to go, but these latest achievements can be regarded as milestones.

Prior to 1974, there had never been a female elected parliamentarian. In Saint Lucia's history only three women have been elected to Parliament, the second and third being only in 1997. There have been some changes in other areas that should be noted. These include the renaming of the national machinery for the advancement of women to reflect the stronger focus and sensitivity to gender equity. Since 1995 two major women's groups have been reorganized. A national umbrella organization, the National Council of Voluntary Women's Organizations, has concentrated on capacity-building programmes for its members and continues to be quite active.

Another development worthy of note is the inclusion of a course entitled Gender Management in the Associate Degree Programme at the (NA) Community College, the country's lone tertiary institution. There have also been improvements in the area of legislation. During the period 1996 to 1999 the following pieces of legislation of particular relevance to women were enacted: the Attachment of Earnings Act; the Minimum Wage Act; and the Quality of Opportunity and Treatment in Employment and Occupation Act of 1999, which made sexual harassment in the workplace a criminal offence.

The Government of Saint Lucia, in its commitment to improving the socio-economic status of women and the achievement of gender equity in the new millennium, embraces the vision of the

Commonwealth Secretariat's Plan of Action for Gender and Development. The Government recognizes that achievement of this goal is predicated on the institutionalization of appropriate mechanisms to promote and effect gender equity at all levels and in all areas. The strategy to be adopted is gender mainstreaming, using gender management systems as promoted in the Commonwealth's Plan of Action, which has received tremendous support from Commonwealth Governments.

With this strategy in focus, Saint Lucia is well poised to accelerate the process of gender mainstreaming that is so essential to the advancement of gender equity and social justice and securing the advancement of women.

Saint Lucia hopes for a successful outcome of this session that will build on Beijing. We remain committed to working with the international community to achieve these very important objectives.

The President: I now give the floor to His Royal Highness Prince Sobandla Dlamini, Minister for Home Affairs of Swaziland.

Prince Sobandla Dlamini (Swaziland):I and the rest of my delegation, which is comprised of Government officials and various non-governmental organizations representatives, bring with us the warm felicitations of His Majesty King Mswati III, Her Majesty the Indlovukazi, and the people of the Kingdom of Swaziland.

My country is proud to be part of this continuing and noble effort to work progressively towards fulfilling our common goal of achieving gender equality, peace and development, charged to us by the Charter of this Organization. It is in the pursuit of this objective that we must continuously work towards promoting and maintaining peace, development and equality of all in an effort to achieve international cooperation in addressing issues of a socio-economic, cultural and humanitarian nature.

Five years after the historic Beijing Conference and a few months before the Millennium Summit, our task is to examine the progress we have made and to make an assessment of the problems and obstacles we have encountered, thus enabling us to develop further initiatives and strategies.

Following the Beijing Conference, where I was privileged to lead my country's delegation, Swaziland developed a national platform for action through a wide consultative and participatory process. This led to the establishment of the Gender Unit, which was tasked with coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The Government recognizes the major role played by the non-governmental organizations in the country as well as by some members of the international community in the work to achieve national goals and objectives. I stand here proud to say that there is a strong collaboration between my Government and non-governmental organizations in working towards gender equality. This collaboration has contributed immensely in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Five priority areas have been identified. The initial step was to break the evident misconceptions and misunderstandings which lead to a large extent, to negative attitudes and, inevitably, to delayed action towards any meaningful progress. This situation existed due to long-held beliefs and social attitudes on the part of both women and men, that women and girls are secondary to men and boys. The breakthrough came about through intensified sensitization programmes that were undertaken for both the policy makers and the wider population in general. To this end, the concept of gender equality has become clearer, and consequently there is wider participation in its promotion.

Prior to the convening of the World Summit for Social Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women, my country undertook to consult, at the national level, on the overall economic and social development of the country. This led to negotiations with all stakeholders on the National Development Strategy.

The Strategy is a comprehensive national policy blueprint that encompasses all the vital socio-economic issues and is projected over a period of a quarter of a century. One of the eight technical subcommittees formed in developing this Strategy was a gender subcommittee that served to ensure that a gender perspective is mainstreamed in the overall Government policy and programmes.

In the effort to implement this Strategy, the Government further developed short- and medium-term programmes of action that provide for specified time-frames and accountability. One such programmes is a task force that has been established to work specifically on gender balance.

One of the main means for addressing poverty in our country is through initiatives that promote and support small and medium business. Among these initiatives has been the establishment of the Enterprise Fund by His Majesty the King himself. The records of the loaning scheme show that most groups that have benefited from the Fund are women who have been marginalized and excluded from the economic mainstream for a long time.

A further top national priority is the commitment of the Government to reaching the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health care for all. In this regard, budgetary allocations are annually increased to improve the provision of health services. However, such efforts have been undermined by HIV/AIDS, which is currently the most serious threat to mankind as a whole. We believe, however, that coordinated efforts should be enhanced to provide assistance, including medical attention to people infected with the disease, and to alleviate the economic and social difficulties faced by those affected, especially the orphans.

Recently, the Government introduced the Child-to-Child initiative and programme to counter the scourge in schools. This approach is mainly targeted at children in schools with the aim of addressing problems largely experienced by girl children, such as early pregnancies and various forms of violence against them. It is expected that this initiative will be infused into the minds of all and, especially, into the school curriculum at all levels of education.

These are a few examples of initiatives undertaken in an effort at implementing the Beijing Platform for Action. Evidently, a lot more still needs to be done and far greater resources are required to facilitate such activities. I would like to conclude by reiterating the commitment of the Government and the people of Swaziland to continuously seeking and developing further strategies to address the existing concerns and emerging trends, with the ultimate goal of being a nation of equal opportunities, regardless of gender.

It is against this background that the Kingdom of Swaziland fully appreciates and supports the international efforts demonstrated at this special session of the General Assembly to make an assessment of our successes and failures, identify current trends and outline further actions. We support the ongoing consultations on the outcome document and look forward to its unanimous adoption. Most importantly, we recommit ourselves to the full implementation of the outcome of this session.

Allow me, Sir, on behalf of my delegation and indeed on my own behalf, like my brothers and sisters who spoke before me, once again to congratulate you and your colleagues in the Bureau for the diligent manner in which you have so successfully and consistently managed this session. For me and for those of us from your subregion, you know exactly what it means, because if I say officially that we are happy that our homeboy is managing such an important session, that is about our grandmothers, our mothers, our sisters, our aunties, our children and our daughters.

The President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Ms. Karita Bekkemellen Orheim, Minister for Children's and Family Affairs of Norway.

Ms. Orheim (Norway): The Beijing Conference illustrates the strength of women and of cooperation. The Beijing Platform for Action was made possible by the combined efforts of grass roots women and women in high-level positions. Only through broader consultation and closer engagement with women's organizations and civil society at large can we make substantial headway.

I will concentrate my remarks on the following issues: poverty, reproductive rights, violence, armed conflict and the role of men.

Poverty is the first of the 12 critical areas of concern addressed in the Platform for Action. Poverty is to live a life in constant insecurity, not knowing what tomorrow may bring. Women form the majority of the poor. The eradication of poverty is fundamental. We need to level inequities between rich and poor, between countries and regions, between women and men. We need to empower women. It has been well documented that investing in women pays a very high dividend.

Mr. Nejad Hosseinian (Islamic Republic of Iran), Vice-President, took the Chair.

In Norwegian development cooperation policy, inspired by the Nairobi Conference, this was already acknowledged 15 years ago. Promoting gender equality figures among our main targets for development cooperation. The gender mainstreaming approach is supported by a concrete strategy for women in development.

Reproductive rights are about how human rights find expression in everyday life. Human rights are women's

rights. We need to develop basic health services that incorporate a gender perspective and that meet the needs of women in terms of contraception and family planning, pregnancy, qualified assistance at birth and pre- and post-natal care. There must be access to treatment for and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Female genital mutilation remains a challenge. Meeting these needs requires resources from national and international sources alike. Norway will continue to be a committed partner in this respect.

What is there to be gained? According to the World Health Organization, 15 million women every year suffer serious health consequences due to complications related to pregnancy and childbirth. Some 600,000 women actually die. Norway proposed in 1995 that the Platform for Action should call for the decriminalization of women who have had illegal abortions. After lengthy discussions, it was agreed to encourage Governments to consider reviewing punitive laws in this perspective.

For over 20 years, Norwegian women have had the final say with regard to abortion. There were fears, even among those supporting the new law, that the number of abortions would rise. This did not happen. Abortions take place in all societies. The issue at stake is the conditions, safe or dangerous, under which abortions are carried out. I know that the issue of unsafe abortions continues to be problematic in many countries, but we must find ways to eliminate this dire risk to women's lives and health.

In Norway, we have taken further steps. To us, sexual rights are about sexual integrity and self-determination. They also cover sexual orientation and the right to choose one's partner freely, be it a person of the same or of the opposite sex. We have adopted a law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Same-sex relationships can be formalized, in accordance with the Partnership Act. For us, the debate on sexual orientation has been an opportunity to develop respect for each other, thereby contributing to a more open and accepting society.

Our lives are defined by economic position, ethnic origin, age, bodily and mental ability and sexual orientation. Society needs to be responsive to this multifaceted reality. Multiple forms of discrimination are still at work. Power structures must be altered. We need to be brave on this issue.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is a milestone achievement for empowering women to fight gender-based discrimination. The Protocol enables groups and individuals to submit complaints for consideration by the CEDAW Committee. Norway encourages countries that have not already done so to sign and ratify the Protocol as soon as possible.

Norway very much appreciates the work of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. Her work has contributed to raising the awareness of the international community as to gender-related human rights violations. Her conclusions point to the need for more effective legal instruments and other measures to protect and help women who are subject to violence.

Gender-based violence is about wife-battering, rape and sexual abuse; it is about women and children being bought and sold as a commodity into prostitution. The sex trade is a blatant human rights violation. It means speculating in women's poverty and in economic and social structures that in many countries force women to sell their bodies for sheer survival and to be able to feed their children. Liza Maza, Secretary General of the Philippine non-governmental organization Gabriela, says it quite simply:

> "Women from all sectors become more vulnerable to prostitution because of extreme poverty."

Armed conflicts of the past few years have produced horrifying examples of systematic assaults on women, such as mass rape and other violations. Women in armed conflict suffer also from hardships related to insecurity, displacement and caring for family members under extremely difficult circumstances. We welcome the increased attention by the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council to humanitarian assistance and protection of women and children in armed conflict. Humanitarian organizations must continue to focus on ways and means to effectively target humanitarian assistance to women and children. We encourage all parties to armed conflict to respect and implement the provisions of international humanitarian law.

Men also stand to gain from gender equality. Masculinity has for far too long been understood in the context of men being superior to women. This gives power to men but also has a negative impact on their lives. They themselves become trapped by limiting gender stereotypes.

Today we see that men are increasingly discussing their own roles. They re realizing the need to reconcile work and family, and some men are organizing against male violence. The research community is studying maleness and gender roles, and the ingrained idea of man as the neutral sex and standard human being is being weakened. Men need to develop their caring abilities and take a fuller part in family life. This process implies a challenge to the prevailing power structures. Male and female activities must be equally valued.

In conclusion, I have been impressed here in New York by the forceful presentations of the groundbreaking work that women's organizations have done in several areas. I have been impressed by the strong international networks and the coordination of work and ideas. There is no doubt that Governments must engage more actively in partnership with this force for change in order to follow up on commitments.

Now is the time to move from rhetoric to practice. There is no excuse for holding back. Now is the time to be courageous in pursuing the goal of gender equality. Now is the time to empower women. We owe it to our children - to our daughters and our sons.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Gisèle Guigma, Minister for the Advancement of Women of Burkina Faso.

Mrs. Guigma (Burkina Faso) (*spoke in French*): My delegation is very pleased warmly to congratulate Mr. Theo-Ben Gurirab on his election to the presidency of this special session. We can assure him of our full cooperation, in a positive and constructive spirit, with a view to ensuring the success of our work here.

It is clear that this special session of the General Assembly, which for five days will be dealing with the status of women in the year 2000, is of paramount importance. Above and beyond the topic itself, the number of participants and the level of participation from all over the world shows that our struggle - women's struggle for gender equality, peace and development - is no longer just a mirage but a tangible reality, and this session will so indicate in letters of gold on the lintel of the third millennium.

Five years ago in Beijing, Burkina Faso entered into firm commitments that have now, we are pleased to say, taken form. We have established, for instance, a follow-up committee for the Beijing Platform for Action and a Ministry on the Advancement of Women. The establishment of the national committee for better follow-up of Beijing measures was carried out pursuant to the recommendations of the Fourth World Conference on Women, which stated, *inter alia*, that:

> "Governments have the primary responsibility for implementing the Platform for Action. Commitment at the highest political level is essential to its implementation, and Governments should take a leading role in coordinating, monitoring and assessing progress in the advancement of women." (A/CONF.177/20/Rev.1, para. 293)

To that end, the Ministry on Social Action and the Family, which was the relevant body at the time, began, under the personal supervision of the head of State, to work on the establishment of a national committee to follow up the conclusions and recommendations of Beijing. The determination and seriousness with which that committee undertook its task, along with the very careful preparatory work it did, made it possible to elaborate a programme of action that takes into account our national realities and socio-cultural environment. It was because of those realities that we found it necessary to establish, on 10 June 1997, a Ministry on the Advancement of Women, thereby demonstrating the political will of the Government to provide a framework for coordinating all activities aimed at promoting the advancement of women.

This new institution is more functional and more pragmatic. It operates at various levels and is thus better adapted to tackle the numerous problems facing women. A three-year plan of action on the advancement of women was prepared for the period 1998-2000, with support from all national and international partners interested in gender issues. That plan of action identified 10 priority areas from among the Beijing recommendations which Burkina Faso undertook to work on within the context of a national programme consisting of five elements.

With regard to the first element, the fight against poverty, several measures have been adopted. Those include supporting women's access to credit and land ownership; making people, particularly in rural areas, more aware that there should be equitable distribution of labour between men and women; training for girls

and handicapped women; and organizing women into economic interest groups. With regard to the latter, we have a national project involving shea by which women can benefit from improved production technologies.

With regard to the second element, it is thanks to a firm commitment by the State to promote education, training, health, the environment and the protection of the fundamental rights of women and girls that the development of women's human resources is developing in line with what President Blaise Compaore himself has said: that "the development of women and their full participation in national life depend on women having access to education and know-how".

Literacy for women and girls has also been stepped up so that they can promote their own advancement and become involved in production cycles. At the same time, administrative and legislative steps have been taken to prevent violence against women and such degrading and backward practices as forced marriages, female circumcision and other forms of genital mutilation.

The third element, the promotion of the fundamental rights of women and girls, is being promoted through advocacy and gender and development training, development, as well as through the preparation and adoption of regulations guaranteeing employment-related equality between men and women. The process of making women more aware of their rights is also under way through the information-education-communication system, because once regulations and laws are passed they are particularly useful to women who know how to use them. A special effort was made in this regard to educate girls, thanks to the adoption of a plan of action.

The fourth element of this programme is advocacy and social mobilization to ensure a more positive image for women. Sexist prejudice has always made women appear to be artificial constructs whose basic function is to please while remaining incapable of standing side-by-side with men in decision-making roles. This vision of women as objects was exploited widely by mass media seeking sensationalism. This is why actions are also now being taken to improve women's productions in media and to train women in management so as to enable them to take on responsibilities heretofore reserved for men. In this specific area, we are trying to provide the best possible psychological climate so that women can be more involved in decision-making.

The last element of the programme stresses institutional mechanisms for implementation, coordination, follow-up and evaluation. Focal points have been established in the Ministry responsible for the advancement of women, as well as within other ministerial departments and agencies, to ensure the Ministry's participation in all such activities.

Above and beyond the work of the Ministry, we should also take note of the activities of the National Committee to combat all forms of discrimination against women, the establishment of a National Commission on the advancement of women and the imminent establishment of the National Council of Women. In addition, there are other initiatives to strengthen action at the national and international levels. Finally, we have also developed a repertoire of the areas in which women have competence so that we can better use our national expertise at the domestic level.

As the Assembly can see from the outline I have given, the implementation in Burkina Faso of the conclusions and recommendations of Beijing is grounds for legitimate pride. However, as in most developing countries, there are still socio-cultural patterns that face particularly strong resistance, in addition to the many existing economic constraints. These are the usual obstacles we all know about, but they indeed truly hamper development.

Along other lines, the re-emergence of some endemic diseases in Africa — primarily malaria, but AIDS above all — cuts into the vitality of our States, seriously reduces life expectancy and jeopardizes our opportunities for development. However, we must not give in to pessimism; quite contrary.

The struggle for the advancement of women is indeed a long-term undertaking. However minimal, the results achieved so far are nevertheless real. No one can hope to undo in a very short time what has taken centuries to create. We are all aware of this.

Together with other States and with its partners, and as it demonstrated at the women's conference of la Francophonie in Luxembourg, Burkina Faso intends to continue this struggle on the basis of decisions to be taken at this special session. Our only goal is to help build a world where the children, men and women of

Africa and elsewhere will all live together in harmony and brotherhood. For such a colossal objective, even greater international solidarity is needed to help eradicate poverty, illiteracy and disease, which are prerequisites for halting crises, ending conflict and ensuring the triumph of peace.

We call for greater responsibility on the part of the international community to ensure that this special session is a true success. In Burkina Faso we are committed firmly and solidly to the advancement of women. We will do our utmost to implement the measures and recommendations of this session.

In its capacity as President of the Council of Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, my country intended to make a statement to express the views of the Islamic community on the issue of women. However, given time constraints, I have asked the Permanent Observer of the Organization of the Islamic Conference to the United Nations to make that statement.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Sheikha Hessa bin Khalifa Bint Hamad Al-Thani, Vice-President of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs of Qatar.

Ms. Al-Thani (Qatar) (*spoke in Arabic*): It gives me great pleasure at the outset to extend to the President of the General Assembly my sincere congratulations on leading the meetings of this special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century". We are fully confident that his experience and political wisdom will lead our work to success. My delegation would like to assure him of its full cooperation so that our meetings can achieve their envisaged objectives.

I would also like to thank the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi Annan, for his report on the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, which will no doubt enrich our discussions and be helpful to our meetings.

This special session, and the subjects before it, assume a special significance because of the urgent need to review the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action five years after their adoption in order to examine and appraise achievements and to identify obstacles that have prevented the attainment of some goals. It is our hope that concerted efforts will be made to find an appropriate formula that will achieve the desired objectives of the sustainable development of societies.

We must therefore overcome all of our disagreements regarding the understanding and implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and build on what has been achieved so far, taking into consideration the cultural and historical differences among the peoples and societies that constitute this Organization. These differences are the natural result of the cultural, educational, religious and ethnic diversity of peoples. Nevertheless, they should not be a source of conflict and disagreement. Rather, they should be a source of support and enrichment for the Organization. This will not come about through attempts to impose the views or culture of one society on another, but rather by harnessing these differences in order to maintain a multicultural international community and respect for the sovereignty of States and nations over their national legislation and laws and the specificity of their beliefs and cultures.

Under the leadership of His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, the Emir, Qatar believes in the important role of women in building the family, society and the modern State, based on the efforts of all its citizens, and believes that development cannot achieve its envisaged results without the participation of women. For its part, the State has taken important steps to support the participation of women and has guaranteed them equal rights so that they can contribute effectively to various aspects of life.

I would like to review some of my country's endeavours in this regard, which will no doubt continue to provide the best possible life for our people. In the field of education — the linchpin of the building of nations and societies — the State provides free schooling at all levels of education for boys and girls alike. The State strives to develop educational curricula that keep pace with the spirit of the age in which we live. As a result of this enlightened educational policy and the continuous support for girls and women in regular and higher education, the percentage of female enrolment in secondary schools has increased to 73 per cent and that of female teachers to 59 per cent in preparatory schools and to 33 per cent in secondary schools. As for the university, Qatari women account for 50 per cent of the teaching and research staff, notably in the science faculties. For those who lacked

the chance to receive an education, the State has established centres and schools to combat illiteracy. In this regard, we are proud of the low level of illiteracy in Qatari society.

As for the health field, which is no less important than education, the State has established specialized hospitals and health care centres that cater for all segments of society, especially women and children. Moreover, a family doctor programme and a programme for early cancer detection are provided through these centres. Medical services are provided at no cost to everybody without discrimination.

Within the social security system, the State provides financial support for widows, divorcees and orphans. In addition, it provides free housing out of its concern for the stability of the family, which is the foundation of society. Non-governmental organizations contribute to the empowerment of women through technical and vocational training, and especially through helping poor families to find alternative or additional sources of income.

In the field of economic development, the State of Qatar has provided equal opportunity for men and women to gain access to employment opportunities and equal pay. Women play an important role in economic and commercial life. They enjoy the right to ownership and the right to dispose of their funds and inheritances. These rights are guaranteed for women by Islamic shariah, the constitution and the law.

The political rights of women and their participation in elections as voters and as candidates are another achievement of the wise policy pursued by His Highness the Emir. In his guidance to the committee designated to draft the permanent constitution of the country — the first since independence — His Highness referred to the establishment of an elected legislature in which both men and women equally enjoy the right to vote and the right to run as candidates. Women participated in elections to the Central Municipal Council in March 1999 both as candidates and as voters. Currently, women occupy senior positions in the various State ministries; three women serve as deputy ministers, and women also occupy senior executive positions in the institutions of civil society.

The establishment of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs, headed by the first lady, Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al-Misnad, is a landmark in the development of the Qatari family. It embodies the State's interest in creating an institutional mechanism to promote the family. In the short time since its establishment, the Council has reviewed and proposed legislation relevant to the family and has contributed effectively to the development and adoption of various programmes related to women, children, people with special needs, youth and senior citizens. In undertaking these efforts, the Council has received unlimited support from Her Highness the first lady.

In this context, I would like to pay tribute to the pioneering role played by civil-society institutions in the State of Qatar in supporting public efforts for the advancement of society, contributing to the empowerment of the family, and supporting the positive role of women, to enable them to face the challenges of modern life.

Since time does not permit me to address all the points included in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, I have confined myself to basic points which are common to all societies. Since we are concerned with and interested in events that take place in the international community of which we are part, we feel that armed conflicts in some countries constitute the major obstacle to development. Therefore, concerted international efforts must be undertaken to contain these conflicts and to devote the resources that such conflicts squander to further development and production. Developed countries have a major role to play in promoting investment in developing countries and in transferring the necessary technology to those countries. Also, finding a solution to the indebtedness that strains numerous third-world economies is a top priority if we are to eliminate poverty and contribute to the achievement of fair globalization that not only would benefit developed countries but would include all others as well.

In 1995, Qatari women were not represented at the Beijing conference. Today I am proud to stand before the General Assembly as representative of my country, a country which aspires to further achievements for Qatari women and to their advancement in various fields. We know that we have a long way to go. But we earnestly seek the advancement of the Qatari family. We extend hands to everyone with a view to achieving the ideals, aims and objectives of an international community governed by amity and harmony. We wish this session every success.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency The Honourable Helen D'Amato, Member of Parliament, Chairperson of the Social Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives of Malta.

Ms. D'Amato (Malta): We have to acknowledge that the role of women in the development of society has been the object of considerable attention at major international conferences. That notwithstanding, women continue to face enormous challenges in their participation in the social, economic, political and cultural fields. Statistics reflect the odds that have yet to be overcome. Discrimination affects women throughout their lives. Indeed, in some instances, sexual disparities start at the earliest stages of life.

One third of all families worldwide are headed by women, the majority of whom are poor. Moreover, their dependents, young and old, lack education, health and other support services, and frequently are deprived of access to economic resources and legal protection. There still prevails a discomfiting number of countries where women are paid less than men for the same work, with an even greater disparity for work of equal value. Women feature prominently in the illiterate population the world over. Women's daily work is often not adequately remunerated and household work not sufficiently valued.

Prejudice and discrimination, and negative attitudes and behaviour have not only hindered the integration of women in society but have often led to their marginalization or exclusion from social and cultural life. As a result of higher life expectancy, women too often run the risk of a more pronounced reduction of socio-economic support. This results in a greater dependence on formal support services, where these are available, and can lead to their social isolation and segregation.

The advancement of women forms an integral part of social development. Delimiting the empowerment of women solely within this specific — albeit important — perspective, would be a mistake. Women's right to contribute to the building of a dignified society has an intrinsic value, and, like other human rights, it cannot be subjected to a regime of relativism. The promotion of equality and the facilitation of empowerment are the means through which societies acknowledge and ensure the right of women to participate fully in the dynamic process through which cultures evolve and communities develop.

The empowerment of women depends to a large extent on the ability and commitment of communities to educate and take measures which ensure greater participation. Commitments undertaken by Governments at past world conferences could serve as sound foundations for further evolution. The thrust of the Beijing Platform for Action is in itself a reflection of the strides made in recent years to ensure the harmonization of legislation with social evolution. Achieving gender equality is a dynamic process. Account has to be taken of the different impact that policies and legislation may have on women and men due to their different status, economic situation, access to resources, involvement in decision-making and social roles.

It is certain that one of the main causes of distress among women is extreme poverty, which has spread to a large part of the world and in the process is denying women the enjoyment of their rights. Poverty leads to hunger, disease, illiteracy and consequent despair. It is the absence of equity and the weakening of solidarity. The effects of internal and external conflicts add to the distressing situation of women, making them a large proportion of the world's refugee population, which runs into millions. Many suffer from detention, sexual assault, prostitution, torture, hazardous working conditions and other forms of violence or abuse. More often than not, they suffer in silence.

Women are entering the labour market in unprecedented numbers and pursuing a greater role at all levels of public life. Governments are adopting major legislation that acknowledges women's right to equal opportunities and treatment and respect for their human rights. As a result, women are increasingly gaining their rightful access to health care, education and civil justice. Despite all this, women continue to face disadvantages and, at times, discrimination in various spheres. Allow me to repeat that they live through this in silence.

The advancement of women is an ongoing process. The creation of structures should ensure that policies keep pace with development. Partnership between women and men, in development and in peace, should be a key thrust in our national policies. In economic terms, this partnership is unequal and heavily weighted against remuneration and rewards for women.

The Government of Malta is firmly committed to the fundamental right of equality between women and men, both de jure and de facto. In this regard, the main objectives in promoting our national policy on gender equality are the elimination of all forms of discrimination and the advancement of women in the legal, civil, political, economic and social spheres.

In this respect, Malta prides itself on having made significant strides in recent years. Our commitment to the provision of equal access for both sexes to full participation in the social dynamic is total and irreversible. The post-Beijing years have been a busy time for the promotion of gender equality in Malta. Our national machinery has worked assiduously and in close cooperation with civil society to fulfil the commitments of Beijing. Significant advances have been made possible through a firm and consistent political commitment to the elimination of discrimination and the promotion of a mainstream approach enabling women's full social participation.

Key indicators reflect these advances. Measures have been introduced to enable the balancing of work and family life. Our collective commitment should ensure that women and men become equal partners in marriage, on the basis of the concept that the family is the basic unit of society. A policy of zero tolerance of violence has been given and is still being given priority attention.

Our female graduate population currently exceeds its male counterpart, and over the last decade, female representation on Government boards and committees has trebled.

As regards legislation, the pre-Beijing amendment of the Constitution to provide a legal remedy for discrimination based on sex has been translated into the removal of discriminatory provisions in legislation relating to such issues as the civil code, income tax, social security and employment. A working group is conducting a review of all Maltese legislation to ensure that any outstanding hidden discriminatory provisions are identified and removed.

Firm efforts have been made to integrate a mainstream perspective into the formulation and analysis of policies. In this regard, the national machinery has developed methodologies for the carrying out of gender impact assessments. These methodologies are being implemented through the focal points within Government structures to ensure that policies and programmes do not have an inherent gender bias. During this last year, gender impact assessments have been carried out in sectors as diverse as broadcasting, tourism, occupational health and safety and equal opportunities for people with special needs.

The Government of Malta endorses women's rights to labour market participation. The well-being of the Maltese family remains central to social policy in Malta. In formulating such policies, balance is constantly sought between women's individual autonomy, the dignity of a woman's traditional role of mother and the reciprocal partnership in marriage.

Acknowledging that the attainment of this balance is not always easy, Malta has striven to enable women — and, indeed, men — to reconcile their work and family responsibilities. Important measures have been introduced, in particular regarding parental leave, childcare facilities and career breaks for parents. In addition, reduced working hours and responsibility breaks for those who care for children and the elderly, as well as pro-rata benefits for part-time employees, the majority of whom are women, have been adopted.

The girl child and the older woman are also a focus of attention. The national curriculum has been revised and firmly reflects gender equality. Access to technological education has been improved, and this is reflected in the fact that more young girls are opting for technical studies. Older women enjoy access to a package of care that enables and facilitates community integration.

More needs to be done. A watchful eye must be kept on newly emerging forms of female poverty, particularly in relation to the economic situation of one-parent families and the social integration of women with health or mobility problems. The election of women to positions in Government, whether national or local, has risen steadily. More effort is still needed to encourage women to stand for such elections.

Too many areas of social and economic life are still considered male domains. Solidarity and cooperation must remain the two main elements in translating words into deeds. We must build social safety nets to ensure that women are not denied their basic needs. Due to the complexity and interconnection of the issues involved, the follow-up and implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action

should be a particular challenge. Although the main responsibility for the implementation rests with national Governments, the importance of the contribution of all other social partners within the State cannot be minimized.

When deciding on policies and actions to actuate the provisions of Beijing, the international community must remain aware of the bond between economic development, good governance, democracy and respect for human rights. This goal can be achieved only with the contribution of all social actors. Refusal to meet the basic needs of women cannot but be an offence to human dignity.

The drive to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women has been accelerated. It has now taken on a powerful and global momentum. This momentum must be sustained. The campaign for equality has brought about eventful changes and registered some undeniable advances. It is an exciting era for women around the world. We look forward with courage and confidence to the challenges ahead. We also call upon the solidarity of women — and men — across the world to work towards a society that fosters women's development and celebrates their contribution to society.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Ms. Irene Freudenschuss-Reichl, Chairperson of the delegation of Austria.

Ms. Freudenschuss-Reichl (Austria): It is a great honour and pleasure for me to address this special session of the General Assembly on the five-year review of the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China, in September 1995. Austria fully supports the statement presented by Portugal on behalf of the European Union. The Beijing Conference adopted, in the Platform of Action, a document containing detailed analyses and prolific recommendations to redress discrimination against women, to mainstream a gender perspective into all policies and programmes and thereby to promote equality, peace and development.

This week we must marshal a renewed political commitment and focus on concrete actions to overcome the persisting obstacles to women's full and equal participation in all spheres of life. We must also recognize that new challenges have emerged and seek to respond to them vigorously. It is my firm hope that we can break some new ground on such issues as HIV/AIDS and its particularly severe impact on women and children, as well as on trafficking in women and girls.

The Fourth World Conference on Women looked at equality between women and men through the human rights prism. At the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, the human rights of women and of the girl child had already been explicitly affirmed as an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. Beijing applied this human rights perspective throughout the Platform of Action and adopted many recommendations to empower women to enjoy their rights more fully. In our view, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women continues to be the bedrock of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

It gives me particular satisfaction that one of the key recommendations of Beijing, the recommendation to develop an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, has been successfully executed, under the skilled chairpersonship of a woman diplomat colleague from Austria, Aloisia Wörgetter. The Optional Protocol and the provisions of the International Criminal Court making violence against women a war crime and a crime against humanity will greatly enhance the international legal regime on women's rights once they enter into force. We have to push for their early entry into force. Austria is content that the Protocol received more than 30 signatures and was ratified by Senegal, Namibia and Denmark as of today. I am in a position to announce that Austria's ratification process is far advanced and will most likely be completed in early July of this year.

One precondition for the full enjoyment of human rights by women is sufficient knowledge about these human rights. Human rights education and legal literacy are therefore very important. I am pleased to report that training videos on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women for development cooperation practitioners and women's groups were produced by one of our development cooperation progammes, and they can be viewed in the course of this week. In the context of Austria's endeavours to contribute to the emerging human security network, human rights are our special focus, and human rights education in particular, in that context. All Austrian development cooperation

programme and projects are subjected to a gender impact analysis. Furthermore, promoting the status of women is a specific objective of Austrian development cooperation.

Beijing was very strong on recommending that a gender perspective should be mainstreamed into all programmes and projects. We are still fully supportive of this approach. However, as long as gender equality has not become a reality, we believe that positive action and initiatives targeting women are necessary. With regard to promoting the equitable representation of women in positions of leadership, the United Nations has a very important role as a model. I am pleased to report that endeavours are ongoing in Vienna to enhance the gender breakdown in Vienna-based agencies. There is an active group of women ambassadors, and the heads of agencies are responsive. Nevertheless, there is a clear need for more female candidates to be put forward by national administrations for international posts.

One of the specific commitments undertaken by the Austrian Minister of Women's Affairs in Beijing concerned violence against women. I am glad to report that we have made progress domestically in this area and are also cooperating with various international organizations in this field.

Human rights abuses and severe underdevelopment combine in a particularly heinous form of violence against women in the crime of trafficking in women, mostly for sexual exploitation. According to estimates of the International Organization for Migration, some 500,000 women from Central and Eastern Europe are victims of trafficking and are shipped abroad each year, many of them through my own country.

The Vienna-based United Nations Centre for International Crime Prevention has developed a global programme against trafficking in humans, and Austria provides considerable funding for programme components in Central and Eastern Europe. The Tenth United Nations Congress on crime and justice adopted, in the Vienna Declaration, the target of significantly decreasing the incidence of this crime by 2005. In the framework of that Congress, a workshop was dedicated to the analysis of the specific rights and needs of women in the criminal justice system. Austria will continue to work on these questions, in which our law enforcement authorities have developed special expertise which we are willing to share with other countries.

Gender issues are also of importance to Austria, as the current Chairman-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, where a gender action plan has been adopted and a high-level human dimension meeting will focus on trafficking.

Major Austrian civil society initiatives are particularly sensitive to the women victims of war in the former Yugoslavia. The initiative "Neighbour in Need" has raised some $120 million from non-tax-deductible contributions. 95 per cent of these funds benefit women and children directly. More than 25,000 women, many of them victims of rape and gender-based violence, have received medical care in specialized ambulances.

The impact of this special session of the General Assembly — as impressive as it is enlightening — will be decided not by the quality of the conference proceedings, but solely by the increase in equality for women around the globe. Austria looks forward to cooperating closely with all interested partners to make that increase significant.

We would find it useful if stakeholders interested in particular aspects of the promotion of the status of women were to form policy alliances and cooperate closely. We are ready and willing to do so, in particular around issues of violence against women. Countries of comparable profile could give each other feedback on a voluntary basis on implementation measures and encourage each other to intensify their endeavours to promote equality, development and peace. This would contribute greatly to a more humane world for everybody — for women, men and children.

The meeting rose at 7.15 p.m.